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## Perceptions of wine quality

Stephen J. Charters  
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# **PERCEPTIONS OF WINE QUALITY**

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

From

Edith Cowan University

By

Steve Charters, MA (Oxon)

School of Marketing, Tourism and Leisure

2003

## **ABSTRACT**

The term ‘quality’ is regularly used by those who produce, promote and consume wine. However, the nature and features of wine quality are rarely explained. This study was designed to explore what drinkers consider to be the nature of wine quality and what they believe its features to be. Focus groups and individual and small group interviews were used to explore the conceptualisation and dimensions of wine quality, how that quality is assessed, and what its relevance may be. There were 105 informants, sourced from three states across Australia primarily by utilising friends and acquaintances of the researcher. Informants included consumers with a wide background of consumption practices and involvement levels, and also producers and those involved generally in the marketing, selling and promotion of wine. The study viewed wine as an aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic object and therefore also investigated drinkers’ more general perceptions of the links between wine and other aesthetic products, placing the understanding of quality within that context.

The findings of the study suggest that different types of drinkers have different conceptualisations of quality. Drinkers tend to view quality multidimensionally, offering varying ‘dimensions’. These dimensions may be intrinsic or (occasionally) extrinsic to the product in the glass. Additionally the dimensions operate either ‘catalytically’ (to stimulate a quality engagement with the product) or terminally (the end result of a quality engagement – critically pleasure and enjoyment). Drinkers also approach the evaluation of wine in diverse psychophysical ways. A key factor in the overall disparity of approach appears to be the drinker’s level of involvement with the product and it is suggested that involvement level has an impact on how the drinker conceives quality, understands its dimensions and approaches its evaluation. Quality is perceived by drinkers to link closely to various correlates (including, crucially, cues and situation).

Quality is treated as an experiential, evaluative engagement with the product. The study develops the theoretical understanding of quality by linking current

perspectives on quality within the discipline of consumer behaviour with the emergent concept of aesthetic consumption. Critically, therefore, it examines how consumers view quality within an aesthetic product, stressing issues such as personal taste and the paradox of objective and subjective quality. The findings have two practical benefits. First, for those interested in the production, marketing and consumption of wine, they offer a clearer understanding of the range and diversity of perspectives on quality and its evaluation, as well as its relevance in marketing the product. The study offers specific findings about the language of quality and its use and interpretation amongst various types of wine drinkers. Additionally, for those concerned with aesthetic objects and their consumption, the study offers some pointers as to how consumers engage with and evaluate the product.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- 1 incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- 2 contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
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Signed.....

Date.....

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	<i>Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée</i> . French quality wine designation.
BC	Basic/Premium wine consumers. Those who generally spend less than AU\$10 per bottle of wine, or buy cask wine.
BLIC	Balance, length, intensity complexity. Acronym for one process of organoleptic quality evaluation.
CS\D	Consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction
DOC	<i>Denominazione di Origine Controllata</i> . Normal Italian quality wine level.
DOCG	<i>Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita</i> . Higher level Italian quality wine designation.
H <sub>2</sub> S	Hydrogen sulphide.
ME	Mediators. Those involved in the promotion, distribution and professional assessment of wine.
NSW	New South Wales.
NUD•IST	Non-numerical unstructured data indexing searching and theorizing. (A qualitative software package.)
PCI	Product class involvement (enduring involvement).
PDI	Purchase decision involvement (including brand involvement).
PIMS	Profit impact of market strategy.
PR	Producers. Those involved in growing grapes and making wine.
QWPSR	Quality wine produced from a specified region. European Union quality wine designation.
SA	South Australia.
SC	Super-premium consumers. Those who tend to drink wine priced at AU\$10-15 per bottle.
UC	Ultra-premium consumers. Those who tend to drink wine priced higher than AU\$15 per bottle.
WA	Western Australia.



# **CHAPTER 1:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1 Background**

#### **1.1 The relevance of wine quality**

The term ‘quality’ is regularly used by those who produce, discuss and consume wine, but is rarely defined by them. For instance, it may be used by producers to categorise their wine:

The Pike family has been producing quality wine ... in South Australia since 1886. A family tradition of which we are proud (Pike Wines Pty Ltd, 2000).

Equally – as the following extract from a letter written by a consumer to the wine magazine *Decanter* shows – it may be used by the public:

In fact, it is as important for a wine aficionado to know that certain wine [sic] is top quality as knowing that certain vintage [sic] of a famous wine is clearly below the average, especially if the wine is expensive, because in this case he may save a lot of money (Martinez, 1999).

The concept of quality is important to the wine industry, and to wine consumers. In what is one of the most fragmented of all markets, any criterion which can frame or inform consumer purchase decisions is useful. Therefore the perception that one buys or experiences ‘quality’ by one’s choice may have a significant influence on the consumer decision-making process. Likewise, for wine producers and marketers, understanding the nature of quality and how consumers view it may give them a critical edge in marketing their wines. Nevertheless, it is not clear that there is any common understanding between producers, marketers and consumers about what wine quality actually entails. Indeed, given the varying viewpoints of each group, it

is possible that their interpretation of the significance of the term is substantially different.

Quality, as an element of wine, has a long history. The Egyptians were apparently describing wine as ‘very good quality’ by the death of Tuthankamun in 1352 BC (Johnson, 1989), and the Romans subsequently specified the best regions and the greatest vintages (Johnson, 1989). The wine trade today adopts various mechanisms to grade wine, including the informal, such as consumer magazine tastings, wine shows, and allocating points to wines, and also the quasi-statutory, including appellation systems and classifications.

Much wine writing and most wine marketing appears to be predicated on the unproven assumption that within the constraints of price and availability consumers will select the ‘best’ wine, as they perceive it. The continuing international success of consumer magazines, such as *Decanter* and the *Wine Spectator* (the former for 28 years) with their regular ‘tastings’ which evaluate and score wine, is testament to this. The precise nature of assessing wine quality is rarely explained in this context, but is assumed to rely on a ritualised process of ‘tasting’. Many books seeking to enlighten both the consumer and the expert on the practice of wine tasting have been produced (Amerine & Roessler, 1976; Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Jackson, 2002; Peynaud, 1987; Rankine, 1990; Schuster, 1992). The approach to tasting and appreciation which these texts promote sometimes assumes an aesthetic nature for wine (Amerine & Roessler, 1976). Thus the language of assessment often shares the creative – even florid – language of the criticism of art works. For instance:

It bursts with ripe fruit character on the nose and palate, but still shows an appreciable degree of class. Blackberry patch and plum jam aromas burst from the glass and the first sip delivers the same flavours to each corner of the palate. It is rich and smooth from sip to swallow with soft residual tannins providing a persistently pleasant aftertaste (Thompson, 2000b).

Not all consumers may view wine, in general or in the particular, in such extravagant terms. Nevertheless, an examination of consumer perceptions of wine quality will necessitate consideration of consumers’ understanding of the aesthetic attributes and nature of wine.

## **1.2 The purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand how the term ‘quality’ is interpreted, especially in the context of the aesthetic evaluation of wine. It seeks to do this within the contextual influences affecting the evaluation of wine, such as situation and motivation, as well as cues, attributes, value and involvement. This is achieved by exploring the understanding of quality amongst three reference groups: wine producers, those involved in the distribution of wine and wine consumers<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to record that consumers comprise people with a wide range of consumption practices, for instance those who drink regularly or infrequently and those who will spend a great deal or comparatively little on wine. However, whilst different segments may have a varying understanding of quality, there is no *prima facie* reason to question the importance of the concept of quality to them, nor its potential impact on their decision-making processes. It has therefore been necessary to ascertain the views of consumers who display a range of consumption behaviours.

## **2 Significance**

### **2.1 Marketing, social research and consumer perceptions**

The research has three dimensions of significance. There is an academic relevance to the field of marketing, particularly the discipline of consumer research. The study is also relevant to consumers in enabling them to understand the significance or otherwise of quality to their experience of wine. It is also important to the wine industry in helping them to comprehend how quality in the product is understood by the wider community and its potential significance as a marketing tool.

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that those involved in the production and distribution of wine are also generally keen consumers of the product. The term consumers is used for those who have no professional connection with the wine industry. When the context refers to the drinking behaviour of professionals and consumers the term drinkers is used.

### ***2.1.1 The theoretical perspective***

Quality is an important issue within the field of consumer behaviour, (Holbrook & Corfman, 1985; Olson, 1977; Steenkamp, 1990; Sweeney & Soutar, 1995; Zeithaml, 1988), although its exact nature and its relationship with other factors such as value and price remain subject to debate. However, the problems of definition and the confusion that tend to arise from varying interpretations of the term have led researchers to focus less on the nature of quality itself and more on its relationship to those external factors.

Also relevant when wine is discussed is aesthetic experience. This has been examined in some detail over the last fifteen years (for instance Holbrook, 1998; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1993; Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985; Solomon, Pruitt, & Insko, 1984; Veryzer, 1995; Wallendorf, 1980). However, this examination has rarely directly addressed the concept of aesthetic quality. The consumption and evaluation of wine are in part a process of aesthetic engagement. Any examination of the concept of wine quality must include this aspect of the experience.

Within a broader social context, quality is also perceived to be important. For the anthropologist or sociologist the pursuit of 'quality' would be seen to be part of the process by which individuals mark and shape their relationship with the society or culture they inhabit. This may involve establishing status or position (Bourdieu, 1986), delineating the boundaries of various areas of existence (Douglas, 1987; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), or celebrating the rites of one's life (Thornton, 1987). Any investigation of the concept of quality, particularly in the case of an experiential product like wine which is so often consumed in a wider social context, will add to the social understanding of the significance of quality as a concept.

### ***2.1.2 The consumer***

Wine is a product which inspires a range of levels of involvement amongst drinkers (Lockshin, Spawton, & Macintosh, 1997; Quester & Smart, 1996). It has been noted that this may have an impact on how those who discuss wine perceive its quality:

It is ... 'high involvement' wine drinkers who drive the discussion as wine journalists, judges and buyers. Their interest is in the detail,

because wine is a hobby, or part of their lifestyle. Due to their commitment to wine and the positions they hold, I say that it is their view on quality and price that we are hearing, not that of the consumer (Lockshin, 2002a p. 14).

The essence of Lockshin's argument is thus that the highly involved tend to be professionally involved (Lockshin could have included producers themselves as a group which drives the debate on quality and price). Where they are not professionals they tend to be a minority of committed drinkers (Lockshin, 2002a; Lockshin & Spawton, 2001)<sup>2</sup>. Despite the fact that they are a small proportion of drinkers this group dominates the public discussion about what quality may be, possibly to the exclusion of other, equally valid perspectives. This may be especially relevant in an era when wine consumer tastes and consumption patterns are rapidly changing (Smith & Solgaard, 2000).

Thus, despite the regular use of the term quality both as a marketing device and as a basis for purchase choice, it is uncertain if there is any common understanding amongst consumers of what defines quality in wine. What debate there is about wine quality seems framed not by consumers but by professionals. Many popular writers on wine have offered their own ideas on the topic (for instance Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Halliday & Johnson, 1992; Jackson, 1997; Parker, 1997). However, in practice most of these commentators have outlined the attributes by which quality is judged, rather than addressed the nature of quality itself. Each of their perspectives is different (however subtly), and the wine industry (defined both as those involved in the production of wine and in its distribution) does not promote or adhere to any common definition of quality. Additionally there is little evidence that wine professionals show any understanding of the usage of the concept of quality within other fields.

### **2.1.3 *The wine industry***

The importance of the idea of quality to the wine industry can be shown by a brief analysis of wine production and consumption, both internationally and in

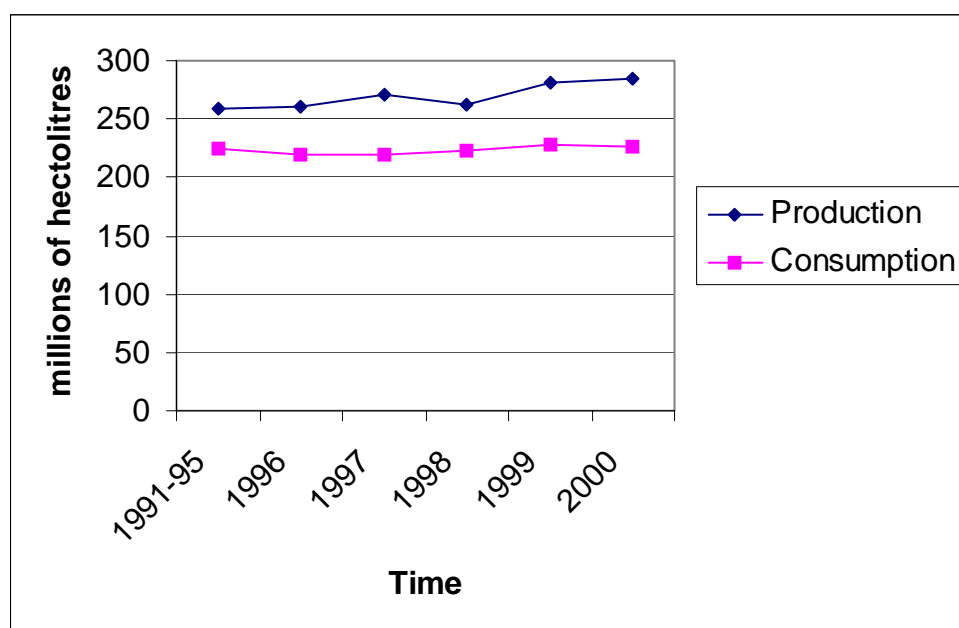
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<sup>2</sup> For instance within a wine tourism context the number of consumers with high product involvement has been assessed at various levels between three and thirty-three percent (Charters & Ali-Knight, 2000; Lockshin & Spawton, 2001).



Australia, over the last few decades. International production has exceeded worldwide consumption over the last twenty years (Osmond & Anderson, 1998; Spahni, 1995). At the same time global consumption has been decreasing, mainly as a result of a rapid shift in drinking patterns in the traditional wine producing nations of southern Europe (Osmond & Anderson, 1998; Spahni, 1995; Wine Institute of California, 2001). This has been partly offset by a rise in consumption in other areas, particularly northern Europe and the ‘new producing’ nations like the United States, Australia and New Zealand (Wine Institute of California, 2001). The last decade has also seen the gradual penetration of wine into Asian markets such as China (Wheatley, 2003). Up to date information is hard to obtain but, as table 1.1 shows, worldwide production during the 1990s exceeded consumption by up to 3.9 billion litres *per annum*.

**Table 1.1 – World production and consumption of wine**

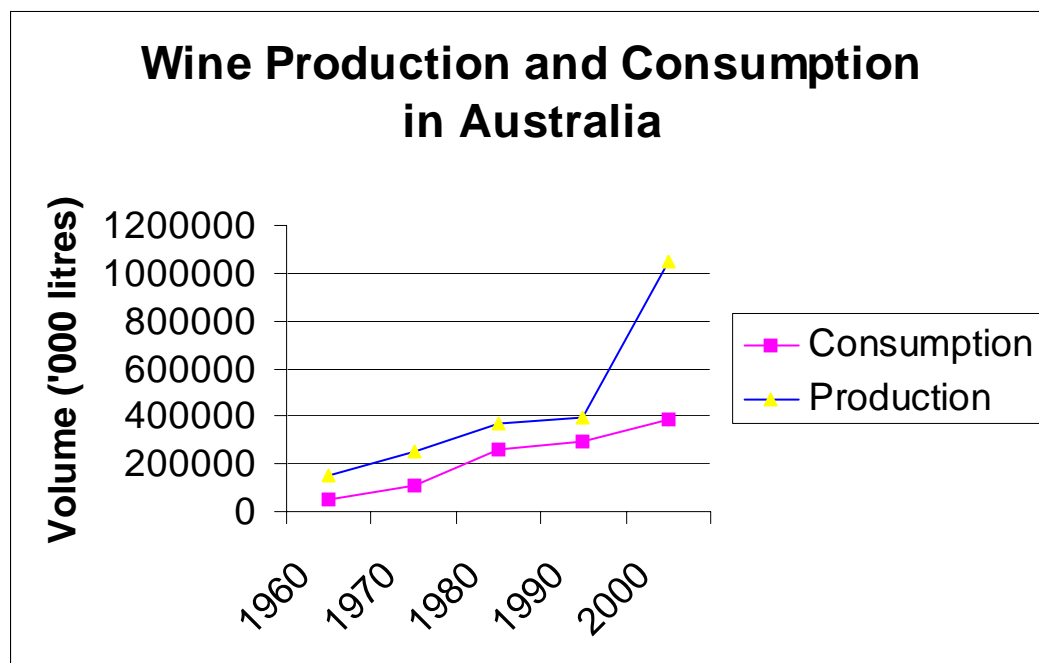


Source: Wine Institute of California (2001). Based on data from the Organisation Internationale du Vin et de Vigne.

Table 1.2 examines changing production and consumption in Australia, revealing a similar pattern. Production has consistently exceeded consumption, but from 1970 to 1990 the surplus was proportionately stable. From 1990, however, production has increased more rapidly than domestic consumption, resulting in

pressure to guarantee greater exports. This production increase has been mirrored elsewhere, especially in Chile and the south of France (Lockshin, 2001).

**Table 1.2 – Wine production and consumption in Australia**



Source: (Anon, 2000b)

Some general conclusions result. The world has had a glut of wine for some time, whilst production in Australia has been rapidly increasing. Consequently it is becoming more difficult to sell wine and the consumer is constantly being offered greater choice. A recent report on the business of wine worldwide by Rabobank International for the Australian Wine Marketing Conference in 1999 suggests that consumers are increasingly shifting towards the consumption of 'quality' wine (Geene, Heijbroek, Lagerwerf, & Wazir, 1999) :

In contrast to the demand for basic wine, which continues to go down, the demand for quality wine has climbed significantly the last few years. This shift is apparent in almost all countries and reflects the standard of living ... The increased demand for classical variety wines also indicates the shift to higher quality wines, as the classical<sup>3</sup> grapes commonly produce potentially higher quality wines (1999).

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<sup>3</sup> Classic (not classical) or noble varieties are those which are considered regularly to make the best wine styles. There is some debate about which varieties actually are 'classic', but Peynaud (1987) suggests that there are sixteen.

The market for wine is more fragmented than other alcoholic drinks' markets. A consumer in a wine store can be faced with anything from 400 to 4000 brands from which to select. Within this context the search for 'quality' in wine becomes crucial. This is supported by a number of studies which have suggested that, at least in Australia and New Zealand, quality is a key determinant of purchase intention (for example, Batt & Dean, 2000; Beverland & Carswell, 2001). Not only may consumers be seeking relative quality within a particular class of goods (for instance commodity wine), but they may also be attempting to make distinctions between classes of goods (whether bulk, commodity or luxury). Because of this overproduction and market fragmentation it is essential for those involved in marketing, assessing and promoting wine to have some understanding of what both producers and consumers interpret as quality. Without this understanding the term may divide those who use it regularly by its misinterpretation, rather than unite them by a common understanding.

The thrust of this research is therefore twofold:

1. To develop an understanding of the breadth of the term 'quality' as it applies to wine within the contexts of both consumption and production. It specifically aims to show, within a marketing framework, whether or not the term quality has any common interpretation.
2. To use that examination of wine quality as a contribution to the understanding of the nature of quality generally (especially its aesthetic dimension) within a marketing context.

### **3 The research**

#### **3.1 The research question**

The fundamental research question is: how do people conceive of and evaluate wine quality? In order to pursue this core question there are a number of subsidiary questions:

- What criteria do people use to benchmark the quality of wine? This question includes the following sub-questions:
  - What sensory processes are used in the evaluation of wine?
  - Do drinkers equate quality to their own personal taste, or do they distinguish between the two?
- How does the evaluation of wine quality at consumption interact with the other factors which relate to quality, such as cues, value and satisfaction?
- How do drinkers conceptualise wine quality? That is, is it considered to be perceived and personal, or objective, or relative to other factors?
- Do people seek quality in wine, and if so, why?
- To what extent do drinkers see the evaluation of wine quality as part of an aesthetic process?
- What is the link, if any, between quality evaluation and purchase decision.

### 3.2 The research process

In order to address these questions a series of explorations were undertaken in Australia. In order to address these questions a series of explorations were undertaken in Australia. Australia is a geographically diverse wine market. The population of 20 million live in six states and two territories. All states bar the Northern Territory produce wine, and there is some regional preference in consumption. Nevertheless, generally the cheaper end of the market (under twelve dollars per bottle) is dominated by mass produced wines originating in the warmest regions, predominantly from South Australia, but also Victoria and New South Wales (Anon, 2003a; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003; Osmond & Anderson, 1998). There has been a growing ‘consumer culture’ of wine (Phillips, 2000 p. 331), which has seen *per capita* consumption rise from around six litres *per annum* in the immediate post war period to around 20 litres today (Anon, 2003a; Osmond & Anderson, 1998). This trend was paralleled by a shift from fortified to table wines (Osmond & Anderson, 1998). Traditionally prohibitionist attitudes were comparatively strong in Australia (Hall & Hunter, 1995), but in recent years a more relaxed attitude has prevailed. Meanwhile the wine industry has undergone the same

consolidation that has been seen in other new producing countries, with the top five producers responsible for 65% of all grapes crushed (Anon, 2003a).

What follows sets out the exploratory study. Thus in chapter 2 the context is set. This comprises the definitions of quality used during the study, the framework of consumption adopted, the nature of aesthetic consumption and the consumer's motivation to drink wine. Chapter 3 examines the concept of quality as it is viewed in marketing and associated disciplines. This includes how quality is categorised and its correlates, as well as considering how quality may operate within aesthetic products. Chapter 4 then considers the concept of quality in the wine-related literature, including both the academic (oenological and gustatory) and the popular. It also considers the various formal methods that have been used in an attempt to classify wine quality.

After an explanation of the methodology adopted in the study in chapter 5, chapter 6 provides some context to the findings of the data collection process, specifically examining the motivation to drink and the views drinkers have about the aesthetic nature of wine. Chapter 7 forms the core of the findings, examining the way drinkers conceptualise wine quality and their perceptions of its components or dimensions. Chapter 8 examines how wine quality is evaluated, investigating the processes used and relating them to cues and the situation of consumption. Chapter 9 attempts a theoretical synthesis of the literature on wine quality with some of the major ideas which arose from analysing the data. Chapter 10 then offers conclusions from the study.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **CONTEXT AND DEFINITIONS**

Before examining the literature on wine and quality in detail it will be necessary to set the context for the research. Critically this includes the definition of quality. It also involves establishing the paradigm for consumption adopted during the research. This is a tripartite perspective on consumption, which considers that it has utilitarian, hedonic and symbolic purposes, the relative importance of which may vary depending on the product, the consumer, and the specific consumption situation. The motivation to drink wine must also be examined, as it is possible that consumers' motivation is intricately bound to their understanding of quality. Additionally the study was carried out (and analysed) with the assumption that wine consumption is, in part at least, a type of aesthetic consumption. This assumption will be examined, which will in turn require a brief examination of the philosophy and psychology of aesthetics. Finally it is necessary to examine why wine is a helpful product to use for the exploration of quality in aesthetic products, as well as define the terms commonly used throughout the research.

#### **1 Defining quality**

The critical term in the research is 'quality'. It is an abstract concept subject to many definitions, which makes precision in understanding its use in this study essential. It is also a term in common usage, and will therefore initially be addressed as the layperson may view it and subsequently as an academic concept. The Macquarie Dictionary (Delbridge & Bernard, 1998) offers ten separate definitions, but essentially there are two overall meanings relevant to this discussion: (1) a characteristic or attribute and (2) excellence or superiority. It is the latter that is generally intended when referring to quality *per se* as a facet of consumer perception (Zeithaml, 1988).

The analysis of the meaning of 'quality' can be developed. The single definition 'superiority or excellence' in fact contains two different interpretations. Superiority is relative; there must be at least one other product of the same class in order for an item to be judged as superior. Excellence is discrete to the individual product. It is either excellent or it is not. The two definitions may well be connected but are not identical. For instance, both definitions operate separately in the Australian wine show system. In a class of (say) chardonnays, there is no limit to the number of wines that can gain more than 18.5/20 and be awarded gold medals – their excellence is therefore assessed discretely. However, only one of these wines can be selected as a trophy winner – the best in its class - which is a comparative judgment. It may well be that consumers view the two alternative definitions as separate processes and goals. Depending on the situation (for instance the purpose of consumption) they may seek merely something that is comparatively better than similar product types, or they may seek excellence as a discrete end in itself. Consumer researchers have typically merged the two meanings without making this distinction (Zeithaml, 1988) and, where it has been made, comparison has been seen to be essential to quality evaluation (Oliver, 1997). The distinction may, however, be relevant from a consumer point of view, at least for aesthetic products and – given the chardonnay example above - almost certainly is relevant from the perspective of the wine producer and critic. It is possible to compare two cars and say which is the better on a number of performance dimensions; it is harder to compare a cabernet sauvignon and a riesling and state which is the best. They may have to be evaluated discretely. This dichotomous definition clouds the analysis of wine quality and frame this study.

## **2 A paradigm of consumption**

There are many frameworks for analysing and categorising the consumption process, each of which has strengths. For instance one can use the means-end chain to relate consumption intention to values (Gutman, 1982; Zeithaml, 1988). This method has explicitly been applied to wine consumption (Hall & Lockshin, 2000; Judica & Perkins, 1992). Alternatively one can propose a taxonomic approach (Holt, 1995). This too has been applied to wine (Groves, Charters, & Reynolds, 2000). As

these varying approaches inevitably colour how consumption is viewed globally it is necessary to set the context for this study by outlining the perspective on categorising consumption which frame the researcher's approach.

The discipline of consumer behaviour developed with a focus on the utilitarian<sup>1</sup> dimension of consumption. Its methods tended to focus on consumers' cognitive processes, particularly information-gathering and processing as determinants of consumption behaviour. This includes, for instance, the stream of work based on Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), subsequently applied, amongst many other products, to wine (Thompson, Haziris, & Alekos, 1994; Thompson & Vourvachis, 1995). Two challenges to this unidimensional approach developed. The first, stemming from a psychological perspective, came from the work of Dichter (1964), later developed by Levy (1981; 1986) and then others. This approach examined the symbolic meaning of consumer goods. 'Symbolic consumption' as a paradigm has produced substantial bodies of research into, and explication of, consumption behaviour (for instance Belk, 1988; Bell, Holbrook, & Solomon, 1991; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Ligas (2000) in an overview of symbolic consumption suggests that the concept has three functions for consumers:

- (1) It allows them to communicate a character or personality to those around them (Solomon, 1983).
- (2) It enables them to delineate their own specific views and activity (Belk, 1988).
- (3) They can interact with others within a 'socially constructed' environment (McCracken, 1986).

This concern with symbolic consumption has also developed in the analysis of consumption as a semiotic process (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1993; Mick, 1986;

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<sup>1</sup> Utilitarian is the term adopted by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and used subsequently by other authors (e.g., Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000). It is not an ideal descriptor, for the aesthetic dimension of consumption has a utilitarian aspect (that is, it has a purpose). However, the term is adopted in this paper for the sake of continuity with previous literature on the topic.



Noth, 1988), and has strong links to certain anthropological approaches to consumption practices (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979).

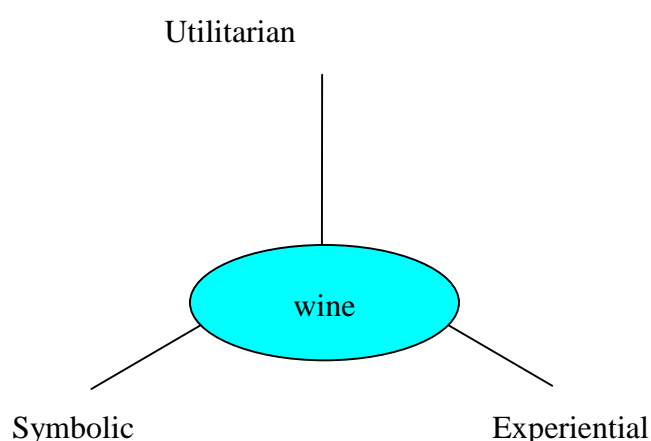
In the early 1980s a second paradigm developed which contrasted utilitarian with experiential and hedonic consumption (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). This interpretation was developed in a series of research papers to show that the experiential processes (fun, amusement, sensory stimulation and enjoyment) were closely linked to the consumer's engagement with the product (Ahtola, 1985; Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Bell et al., 1991; Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook, 1995; Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; Spangenberg, Voss, & Crowley, 1997; Venkatraman & MacInnis, 1985). It was also suggested that sensory cues are likely to be non-verbal and affective rather than reducible to words (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Initially Holbrook and Hirschman included symbolic consumption within their paradigm of experiential consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), but subsequent researchers have separated the two (for instance Ligas, 2000; Mittal & Lee, 1989). This seems valid, for 'fun, amusement, sensory stimulation and enjoyment' concentrate on the personal and sensory experience of the consumption process and are very self-focused, with an aim of feeling good, often in a physical way. Symbolic consumption tends to have a focus on relationships with others (though it can also be self-directed), on communication with others and on how products are used to interpret the world and one's place in it.

This triadic approach to consumption (utilitarian, symbolic and experiential) is regularly used in consumer research at present. Some modify it, such as Richins (1994). She created a fourfold approach, splitting symbolic consumption by separating representations of interpersonal ties (an outward directed focus) from identity and self-expression (an inner directed focus). It has also been noted that there are cultural differences in the relative importance of the three purposes of consumption (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Nevertheless as a broad approach to consumption it has both some validity and some acceptance.

We can therefore use these three approaches – the utilitarian, symbolic and experiential - as a means of analysing consumption purpose. It is necessary to stress that no single act of consumption falls into just one category, nor is a repeated act of consumption invariably given the same weighting between the categories at each

repetition. Reading a book in private, and then reading it amongst one's peers in a work cafeteria, may have varying experiential and symbolic relevance to the reader. This triadic perspective from consumer research is mirrored by some psychological views on the sensory and symbolic response to art (e.g., Cupchik, 2002).

One can conceptualise how this analysis works as applied to wine, in the figure below. Wine consumption tends to be weighted away from the utilitarian, but otherwise potentially equally concentrated on the experiential and symbolic categories, or possibly tending towards one or other of them depending on the precise situation of consumption.



**Figure 2.1 - A purposive analysis of wine consumption**

As well as being situated within this triadic approach to consumption, this study is predicated on the idea that wine operates as an aesthetic product. It is therefore necessary to examine this contention, and outline the precise nature of aesthetic consumption.

It should be noted that the study defines consumption in the broadest terms: drinking, acquiring and collecting are all elements of the process. Buying is not the primary element of consumption, merely one - possibly minor - part of it. However, much of the examination of the current marketing perspective on consumption (especially chapter 3) focuses on purchase, as that has been the main focus of marketing researchers so far.

### **3 The motivation to drink wine**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The motivation for drinking wine may have an impact on how the consumer categorises and perceives its quality. It is therefore pertinent to examine why people drink wine. However, it is relevant to preface any discussion about the social sciences' perspective on motivation for drinking wine with a caution. Generally that perspective sees consumption not as the focus in itself but as an exemplar of some greater issue the researcher wishes to investigate. This has been neatly summarised by Heath (2000 p. 167):

A fundamental curiosity about most of what is written about beverage alcohol especially by scientists, health professionals and other researchers, is that so little acknowledgment is made that the great majority of people who drink do so because they find it enjoyable and pleasurable.

Rather, the primary focus of this form of research tends to be on abuse, status, or social cohesion. Nevertheless, it is necessary to examine motivation across a range of consumption situations not merely excessive consumption. This examination starts by considering the perspective of consumer research. The following must, however, be seen in the light of the social and cultural context of wine consumption. It is often drunk as a group process, and it is a product imbued with substantial social meaning (Thornton, 1987; Unwin, 1996), which may vary from culture to culture (Barr, 1995; Charters, 2002). This inevitably makes it more complex to analysis, and increases the difficulty of interpreting its cultural function.

#### **3.2 Consumer research**

One can note at the outset that academic consumer researchers rarely, if ever, appear to have directly addressed the issue of why people drink wine (and certainly none seem to have explicitly asked consumers to answer the specific question). Nevertheless, consumer research does offer some insights into motivation and it is also possible to glean information from those who have investigated other aspects of consumer behaviour (such as segmentation) for ideas about why people drink wine.

Additionally, other disciplines, especially anthropology, have addressed the topic of drinking behaviour more directly, and those fields too offer useful perspectives. All of this can be interpreted in the context of the triadic symbolic, experiential and utilitarian categorisation of consumption outlined previously. Thus consumer researchers would acknowledge that wine may be consumed in part because of, *inter alia*, the message it conveys to consumers themselves (Belk, 1988); or because of the message it conveys to others (Noth, 1988); or because of the experience it affords (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

### **3.2.1 Symbolic consumption**

As the pedagogues of consumer behaviour regularly point out (e.g., Sheth, Mittal, & Newman, 1999 p. 342), the motivation to consume is a complex process and psychological factors form a key part of decision making processes. Many of the cues we take account of are implicit, and may often have a long history. Thus, they may have become psychologically important over a number of centuries (Dichter, 1964). Dichter (1964) established the general relevance of psychological motivation to the discipline of marketing, although specifically for those involved in advertising.

Dichter's (1964) research was developed by other researchers. Thus Levy (1986), suggests that the individual's motivation to consume stems from the need to establish identity:

Consumption is the outcome of how the consumer interprets what is needed to support an identity comprised of a particular age-grading, sexuality and social position with personality characteristics complexly and subtly derived from the interactions of these basic issues (1986 p. 215).

Levy goes on to apply this to the consumption of beverages. Meaning is inferred from production methods, appearance, impact and variety. Consumption mirrors status in moving from the lower (blander, simpler, nutritious) to the higher (stronger, more complex and intoxicating). Corresponding to this development is a move from relative virtue to relative vice. He also suggests that the progressive 'hierarchy' of drinks is mirrored by a colour change, with the lower level drinks being clear or white and thus symbolically 'good' whilst the higher level drinks (represented at the apex by cognac and whisky) being dark and symbolically bad. This seems a rather

broad-brush approach – cola and coffee, to take two examples, do not fit neatly into this trajectory.

### ***3.2.2 Segmentation and the means-end chain.***

In general the process of attempting to segment wine consumers is not primarily aimed at assessing their motivation. Nevertheless, the various methods used do offer some insights into consumer motivation. Spawton (1991) was the first to offer a segmentation of the Australian wine market. His analysis provides little by way of insight into motivation, other than to note that ‘new wine drinkers’ are socially motivated. Later research, drawing on Spawton and developing his framework, suggested segments of ‘enjoyment orientation’ (Hall & Winchester, 2000) - though without expanding on the nature of that enjoyment. A more recent study modifies Spawton’s segments further, with the identification of ‘fashion/image oriented drinkers’ and ‘ritual-oriented conspicuous wine enthusiasts’ (Bruwer, Li, & Reid, 2001; 2002). Again neither the image orientation nor the relevance of the rituals are examined in any depth.

Some research modifies this approach to segmentation by looking at the occasion of consumption. This approach was first developed as a theoretical concept by Dubow (1992) specifically in relation to wine. In performing some cluster analysis on motivation Dubow suggested that taste is the only motive which is transituational – that is, it is important to consumers in more than one consumption situation. His occasion-based clustering also noted a ‘social’ cluster (focusing on fun and celebration) and a cluster on ‘food enhancement’. Thompson and Vourchachis (1995) applied the theory of reasoned action to wine drinking by relating it to the situation of consumption. They too, helpfully, commented on the ‘importance given to taste in the decision to drink wine’ (Thompson & Vourvachis, 1995 p. 41), though again without any investigation into what exactly taste does for the consumer. They also note the importance of the social context of consumption. In one other study (examining purchase behaviour rather than motivation) taste was again a key factor (Batt & Dean, 2000). One can thus conclude that, whatever the situation, taste is a fundamental incentive to consume wine.

The concept of the means-end chain, which links motivation to values, has also been adopted as a method of explaining consumption (Gutman, 1982). With wine the means-end chain has been utilised specifically to examine motivation (Judica & Perkins, 1992). The analysis offered by Judica and Perkins (1992) suggested that self-esteem, family life and accomplishment were core values which consumers of wine sought, and which they related to drinking behaviour. Additionally for high-level users 'belonging' was a key value goal. However, the research must be treated with caution as they omit pleasure and happiness as ultimate values which other research suggests would be relevant to wine consumption.

The situational perspective of Dubow (1992) has been merged with the means-end chain perspective. Hall and Lockshin (1999; 2000) adopted both approaches, looking at consumption in an Australian context. They assessed the situation of consumption against consequences produced. Mood enhancement, the need to impress others and complementing food were all seen as situations in which wine consumption could be positive.

Outside the Australian context research has also been carried out by Gluckman (1990). He suggests that 'the motivations of a consumer are directed by needs. Those most relevant to the marketing of premium wine brands are the esteem and self-actualisation needs, i.e., a need for self-respect and for self-fulfilment' (1990 p. 32). This inner-directed symbolic focus adds a little to the developing picture of motivation but his methodology is not explained and is thus suspect. Consequently many of his claims appear mere assertions without much supporting evidence.

In summary the research that explicitly looks at consumer behaviour in the wine sector suggests a number of reasons for drinking. These include taste, enjoyment, and food and mood enhancement, as well as various symbolic motives (including those which are inner-directed, such as self-esteem and those which are outer-directed, like image projection). However, none of these motivations have been explored in any detail, nor have they been given any respective weight, although there is some suggestion from the regularity with which it re-occurs that taste may be the most significant.

### 3.3 The social sciences

#### 3.3.1 *Anthropology*

The starting point for an anthropological perspective on the consumption of wine is the work edited by Douglas (1987), 'Constructive drinking: Perspectives on drink from anthropology'<sup>2</sup>. It sets the parameters for an anthropological view of the role of drink in society. The contextual introduction, by the editor, establishes the broad anthropological perspective on alcohol, offering three dimensions for its importance. First, drink can be a part of celebration – and therefore the use of alcohol is often within a situation of strengthening social bonds:

The general tenor of the anthropological perspective is that celebration is normal and that in most cultures alcohol is a normal adjunct to celebration. Drinking is essentially a social act, performed in a recognised social context (Douglas, 1987 p. 4).

Douglas also describes alcohol consumption as allowing us to re-affirm our social world. The use of alcohol is often symbolic of the move from work to relaxation, as well as acting as a marker of personal identity and of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Gusfield, 1987). Connoisseurship is a classic example of this - it marks the individual as well as the wine (Douglas, 1987 p. 8). Third, drink helps us to construct an ideal world:

There is also a sense in which drinks perform the other task of ritual. They make an intelligible, bearable world which is much more how an ideal world should be than the painful chaos threatening all the time (Douglas, 1987 p. 11).

This perspective, that drinking behaviour can help form an alternative to mundane daily existence, has some support from consumer research (Treise, Wolburg, & Otnes, 1999).

Heath (1995; 1999; 2000) has also carried out substantial research in the field of alcohol consumption. Most usefully he has summarised, from an anthropological perspective, why people drink, offering eleven key reasons. Crucial amongst those

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<sup>2</sup> Like most works of an anthropological and sociological nature it focuses on alcoholic drinks as a category, rather than wine specifically, but gives some broader perspectives that can be applied to wine.

(and not already mentioned) are the following: taste (he claimed that ‘there appears to be little reason to doubt most drinkers when they say that they enjoy the taste of what they drink’ (Heath, 2000 p. 167)); celebration; the linked motives of relaxation and mood alteration; hospitality and sociability (about which he suggested that there was ‘universal agreement that the reason most often given for drinking was sociability’ (Heath, 2000 p. 167)); and to pair drink with food.

Reflecting this more recent focus on experiential motivation by Heath some work has increasingly noted pleasure as a reason for alcohol consumption (Peele, 1999). It has also emphasised the transformative, even transcendental, motivation for alcohol consumption, which may offer a quasi-religious experience (Heath, 1999; Marlatt, 1999).

The anthropological analysis of the motivation to drink in France is especially interesting. Nahoum-Grappe (1995) suggests that four ‘drinking patterns’ have historically existed in France: wine with a meal; social drinking, especially outside the home; festive drinking, and, critical to this research, an aesthetic motive:

Drinking wine as an aesthetic experience linked to wine production... Oenological knowledge has become an integral part of the cultural heritage of the French elite since at least the end of the nineteenth century (1995 p. 80).

However, cultural backgrounds may produce different approaches to the consumption of alcohol. Thus, for instance, one can compare what Nahoum-Grappe has suggested with the viewpoint of Hall and Hunter (1995) on Australia. Hall and Hunter analyse alcohol consumption over the nation’s history as occurring in waves. They suggest that, following the high-consumption period in the first eighty years of the colonies’ existence, there was a long decline in consumption from 1860-1930. This resulted from a shift from a male-dominated, rural, frontier-type existence and was mirrored by the development of temperance. This stage was followed by a period of growing consumption from 1930-1980, which was marked by increasing affluence, overseas influences, and the decline of prohibitionist viewpoints. At the end of that period comes the re-emergence of wine consumption as an increasingly important component of the overall structure of alcohol consumption. These cultural factors undoubtedly affect the overall motivation to consume a specific type of alcoholic drink (for instance, predominantly beer in Australia and wine in France.)



### 3.3.2 *Sociology*

The work of sociology on drinking behaviour is less immediately concerned with the process of drinking in its own terms, as a pleasurable activity than as an exemplar of some other social function. It tends to fall into two camps. The first, which is common, is to view the consumption of alcohol as a form of aberrant behaviour, so that drinking is implicitly a 'problem' and viewed as such within society. Thus, for instance, in the preface to a volume entitled 'Why People Drink' the editor states:

We pay billions of dollars yearly for alcohol and additional billions in losses due to its misuse ... In addition, many persons jeopardize their careers, their relationships, their health and even their lives in order to drink (Cox, 1990 p. vii).

The same volume builds on this approach with chapters which relate consumption behaviour specifically to risk and which examine ways in which consumption can be controlled. Historically this has found a mirror in some anthropological research (for instance Anderson, 1968). This approach is entirely valid, as alcohol abuse can be a symptom of societal dysfunction, but it does nevertheless appear in a rather one-sided format in much sociological work.

The second approach in the discipline of sociology sees drinking behaviour, including wine consumption, not as dysfunctional but merely as illustrative of some larger structural analysis of society. Fundamental within this approach, and critical as part of the sociological perspective on motivation, is the work of Bourdieu (1986). His is a complex and subtle analysis but broadly his argument is that taste classifies the consumer and that one's taste is produced by the interaction of educational capital (essentially the individual's educational background), social origin and 'trajectory' – the direction of one's social mobility. Thus:

The fact remains that the art-lover's sense of cultural investment which leads him always to love what is lovable, and only that, and always sincerely, can be supported by unconscious deciphering of the countless signs which at every moment say what is to be loved and what is not (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 86).

Essentially, what Bourdieu is saying is that, whilst the art lover is genuine in his enjoyment of the beautiful, the unconscious reason for his appreciation is its semiotic function – and critically what it says to others about his class status. Consequently

our decision about the quality of an object is a result of our need to ‘establish and mark differences’ (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 466). These distinctions are made within fields of preference – specific examples of which could include products such as drinks, plays, clothes or cars.

Bourdieu’s analysis has a direct relevance both to motivation for drinking, and the pursuit of quality. If people are seeking to classify themselves and be classified by others, then showing our ‘good taste’ (within whatever class and sub-class we are located) is based on showing our awareness of quality. As Bourdieu himself asserts, paraphrasing Kant, ‘taste is an acquired disposition to “differentiate” and “appreciate”’ (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 466). Differentiation and appreciation are at the heart of the assessment of quality.

Bourdieu’s argument is solidly backed by empirical research, but it deals with the macro rather than the micro. Therefore it fails to account adequately for the selection of specific ‘fields of preferences’ made by individuals. Thus whilst those with high cultural and low economic capital (for instance university lecturers) show a marked tendency to prefer ‘legitimate art’ (what in English may be termed ‘highbrow’), he does not account for why an individual may invest time in fine art rather than classical music, or in poetry rather than the novel. Nor, within the fields of preference, is he entirely convincing about the selection of one artist rather than another; why, for instance, should the university lecturer prefer the music of Mozart to that of Haydn? It may therefore be that there is a distinction between taste and the assessment of quality which Bourdieu fails to make.

An alternative perspective is given by sociologists who, unlike Bourdieu, accept an independent aesthetic. In some instances this approach places wine firmly within the aesthetic tradition (Grunow, 1997) and its consumption therefore involves aesthetic pleasure. Grunow bases this perspective both on the philosophers who have examined the issue (notably Coleman, 1965; Fretter, 1971) and the sociologist, Georg Simmel (Simmel (1910) quoted in Grunow, 1997), as well as the perspective of Amerine and Roessler (1976) on wine tasting as an aesthetic experience.

### **3.4 Summary**

Some general conclusions can be elicited from the varying, and often conflicting, approaches of the social sciences to the consumption of alcohol in general and wine in particular. Wine consumption has a symbolic function; it may establish our position in society and our social trajectory and it may help to fix our lifestyle and our self-image. It may be a vehicle for social intercourse, promoting group cohesion via celebration and familial exchange. It has a ritualistic function and in doing so helps us to construct or reconstruct the social parameters of our world. It may be used for enjoyment, for its taste, for pleasure and because it goes with food. For many it is used for its mood enhancement properties, and at this point its consumption can move from the social into the antisocial and harmful.

## **4 Aesthetic products and aesthetic consumption**

### **4.1 Aesthetic products**

The debate about aesthetics began as a branch of philosophy and philosophers still actively discuss the nature of art, the evaluation of beauty and the nature of the aesthetic experience (Dickie, 2000; Korsmeyer, 1999; Railton, 1998; Sibley, 2001). However, aesthetics and the nature of the aesthetic experience can now also be seen as an aspect of psychology (Berlyne, 1971; Berlyne, 1974; Funch, 1997), sociology (Bourdieu, 1986; Grunow, 1997), anthropology (Dissanayake, 1992; Douglas, 1982) and consumer behaviour (Holbrook, 1980; Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985). Nevertheless, as one contemporary philosopher has commented, the different disciplines which study aesthetics 'are only vaguely aware of each other' (Leddy, 2000 p. 118).

The exploration of these ideas in the following discussion is important, not so much because it offers a historical perspective on the development of the notion of quality in aesthetic products, but because the concepts explored will be developed later. Sometimes this exploration will be useful in giving a context to the findings from informants; generally it will be relevant to the final discussion about the study and the synthesis of findings and theory.

What is an aesthetic product? As philosophers argue about the nature of aesthetic processes it is difficult to get an agreed meaning of the term aesthetic. However, a simple definition is:

The study of the feelings, concepts, and judgements arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects considered moving, or beautiful<sup>3</sup>, or sublime (Blackburn, 1994 p. 8).

Blackburn's simple definition has been extended by one psychologist who has suggested that 'aesthetic episodes' contain both sensory and symbolic elements (Cupchik, 2002). The symbolic element of the aesthetic experience is also acknowledged by some philosophers (Goodman, 1968).

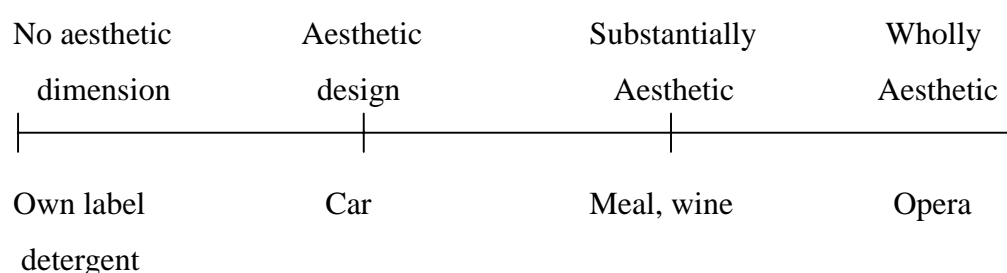
There is discussion over what constitutes aesthetic appreciation, but it is generally accepted to have a cognitive or evaluative element to it – with terms such as judgment, contemplation and perception being critical to the process (Dickie, 1971; Townsend, 1997). Like Blackburn, other philosophers and many psychologists would also allow an affective component (Funch, 1997; Schaper, 1983). However, many – perhaps most - philosophers of aesthetics tend to have a narrow view of what constitutes an aesthetic object, tending to restrict it to 'high art'. For some, a meal, or a bottle of wine, would have no aesthetic value (Beardsley, 1980; Scruton, 1979). Generally psychologists seem to have a less rigid approach to the nature of an aesthetic object (Child, 1969; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), but for them definitional issues are secondary to processes.

Within the discipline of marketing the nature of an aesthetic object is generally not defined precisely but a wide range of interpretations seems to operate. Thus not only food or music may be aesthetic products but the styling of a washing machine may offer at least an aesthetic dimension to a product (Bloch, Brunel, & Arnold, 2003; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). It must be acknowledged that aesthetics has an influence on most consumer goods, as figure 2.2 suggests. The

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<sup>3</sup> There is an argument that ugliness can nevertheless have aesthetic value (Schlegel (n.d.), quoted in Cupchik (2002)); in that case, whilst not strictly beautiful, it may still be moving. Additionally beauty has been superseded as the core of aesthetics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is still the starting point for the determination of whether or not an object is aesthetic (Townsend, 1997). Unfortunately in modern use beauty tends to imply physical attractiveness, so 'attractiveness' may be a marginally better term. However, in this study beauty is retained because of its historical use.

figure visualises the aesthetic influence as a continuum. It offers, below the continuum, exemplars at various stages on the continuum, from products with no aesthetic component whatsoever (an unusual occurrence; perhaps a generic store brand of washing powder is the nearest) through to the highly aesthetic, which could be typified as high art.



**Figure 2.2 - The range of aesthetics in consumer goods**

Although this continuum is often applied to consumer research (Bloch et al., 2003), it is necessary to make a distinction. Some products have an aesthetic function as their primary purpose (that is their consumption is experiential and essentially ‘moving’, or involves a consideration of ‘beauty’). Other products have a purpose which is essentially utilitarian, albeit with some ancillary aesthetic dimension. Indeed, books have been devoted to the latter, such as Schmitt and Simonson (1997), which deals with the management of aesthetics from the point of view of branding and promotion. However, styling and promotional aesthetics do not in themselves create an aesthetic product, and are outside the scope of this study which focuses on products where the aesthetic dimension is functionally dominant.

The concept of ‘aesthetic’ products within the context of experiential consumption is widespread (Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Hirschman, 1986; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; Schindler, Holbrook, & Greenleaf, 1989; Sexton & Britney, 1980), and this approach is mirrored in other disciplines. The anthropologist Douglas, for instance, talks about ‘the aesthetics of a meal’ and ‘food as an art form’ (Douglas, 1982). Grunow (1997), a sociologist, has claimed

that social forms can be seen as aesthetically beautiful. For the purposes of this study it is necessary to reach a definition of aesthetic products.

## **4.2 Aesthetics in philosophy and psychology**

The two major disciplines to engage with the study of aesthetics have been philosophy and psychology. Aesthetics began as a branch of the philosophy in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and was not considered by psychologists until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result aesthetics is often viewed as a merely philosophical discipline. However, psychologists have also spent some time examining the aesthetic responses of individuals.

Philosophers of art would make a distinction between the artistic nature of an object and the process of aesthetic evaluation. Thus a work of art such as a picture may have aesthetic value, whilst a natural view of a landscape may not – but both can be appreciated by the same processes of aesthetic judgment (Sibley, 2001; Townsend, 1997). Additionally it may be useful to make a distinction between the process of aesthetic evaluation and the resulting benefit of aesthetic consumption – a hedonic experience of pleasure<sup>4</sup> or fun (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). It is also worth noting contextually that since the time of Hume there has been a fundamental debate amongst philosophers about the ‘objectivity’ or otherwise of aesthetic judgments (Bayley, 1991; Hume, 1757/1998; Railton, 1998) – and one philosopher (Gale, 1975) has used wine specifically as an example of how these types of judgment can be considered objective. Gale’s (1975, p. 343) argument is that wine evaluation rests on ‘a fairly well-defined observational base’; that evaluative judgments are based on these ‘true’ observations; and that this relationship between an object and perceptual judgments has an empirical validity. This conflict between the universal validity of aesthetic judgments and the subjective nature of personal taste has a direct relationship to consumer researchers’ analyses of quality (discussed in chapter 3 below).

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<sup>4</sup> Mere pleasure has not been considered enough on its own to justify an aesthetic experience. The latter should have features which distinguish it from other pleasurable events (Townsend, 1997). However, philosophers have been unable to agree on what those other features are.

The present study cannot assess whether or not wine is itself a work of art, but it may be that aesthetic judgments can be made about it. Is the evaluation of wine in part aesthetic? This question has been answered in the affirmative both by wine experts (Amerine & Roessler, 1976) and philosophers (Gale, 1975; Railton, 1998).

One clear analysis of the psychological interpretation of aesthetics, adopting common modes of psychological theory, has been offered in a global study by Funch (1997). He suggests four general (and often interacting) psychological approaches to the topic. Chronologically the first of these was the psychophysical (for instance Berlyne, 1971; Child, 1969). This approach focuses on arousal but offers little foundation for evaluative processes in assessing aesthetic products other than an instinctive sensory response. Second, there is the cognitive viewpoint (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972), including Gestalt psychology (Arnheim, 1974; Arnheim, 1988). This perspective concentrates on the response to the aesthetic product as a mental activity (especially examining issues like harmony and balance) and minimises the emotional element of the aesthetic experience. The third approach is the psychoanalytical, developed out of the work of Freud, which focuses mainly on artistic creativity rather than response. Where it does examine the latter it sees the aesthetic response as being firmly rooted in the individual's subconscious – and thus as a subjective process. Fourth is the existential-phenomenological position (such as Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; May, 1975). This also tends to be subjective in approach, but places emphasis on the experiential aspects of aesthetic consumption. This perspective claims that the aesthetic response, at its deepest, is different from any other emotional event, to the extent that it can on occasions be transcendent (Funch, 1997). These different approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and insights from all of them have informed the marketing perspective on aesthetic consumption.

#### **4.3 The nature of the aesthetic experience**

Four issues surrounding the aesthetic experience, all of which have been pondered by philosophers and psychologists, are necessary for the development of

this study. They comprise disinterested attention, the relationship of intensity and balance, objective and subjective taste and the aesthetic encounter.

#### **4.3.1 *Disinterested attention***

A key point, made by both philosophers and psychologists, is that aesthetic engagement is intrinsic – that the product is appreciated for its own sake, rather than for any purpose it may serve. Philosophers term this ‘disinterested appreciation’ (Dickie, 1971; Townsend, 1997) while psychologists refer to it as ‘psychical distance’ (Cupchik, 2002; Funch, 1997). This does not mean that all artworks only have intrinsic value; possession of a painting may have symbolic, as well as aesthetic relevance, as may a group attendance at a film or play (Townsend, 1997). Nevertheless, it is argued that true aesthetic appreciation is a disinterested process. Connected with the argument for disinterested appreciation is the claim that mere sensual pleasure is not in itself an aesthetic experience. The aesthetic appreciation of beauty involves more than the mere satisfaction of bodily needs (Coleman, 1965). One could thus suggest that the hungry person’s eager consumption of food, however good, is not an aesthetic experience whereas the gourmet’s savouring of a complex and carefully constructed dish could be.

#### **4.3.2 *Intensity and balance***

It has been suggested that the aesthetic response is the individual’s arousal in the presence of an aesthetic stimulus (Berlyne, 1974). That arousal and the resulting pleasure increases up to a point of equilibrium (named by one researcher the ‘bliss point’ (McBride, 1990)). This has been termed the Wundt curve, after its originator (Berlyne, 1971). The Wundt curve is a bell curve which represents the hedonic response to the intensity of pleasurable stimulus. Balance is the ideal - too much of the stimulus results in indifference and then it becomes distinctively unpleasant.



### 4.3.3 *Objective and subjective taste*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the ‘antinomy of taste’ was a major issue for aestheticians. Essentially the issue revolves around the fact that ‘taste’ is a personal judgment and that aesthetic experience relies on an emotional response. Yet society claims that some works of art are better than others. The paradox was most effectively put by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1757/1998):

There is a species of philosophy, which ... represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste. The difference, it is said, is very wide between judgment and sentiment. All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real ... But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves (p. 136).

The subjective position thus argues that to seek real beauty is pointless, for it all comes back to personal taste and there are no externally valid, universally agreed reference points on which to base aesthetic judgments. Yet, as Hume pointed out, whilst many poets of the classical era have been forgotten:

The same Homer who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory (p. 139).

Hume claimed to be able to show, empirically, how certain evaluative processes combined to create in a generally acceptable ‘standard of taste’ but his argument was not generally accepted. Subsequently Kant (1790/1987) tried to resolve this paradox, which he named the ‘antinomy of taste’ (1790/1987 p. 210), by arguing that universal validity resided not so much in the judgment made of a particular aesthetic object as in the disinterested attitude which informed that judgment. Thus, if an individual makes a reasoned ‘estimation’ of an object, in a disinterested manner, then that is valid as an objective process (Schaper, 1983). Kant’s argument likewise was not perfectly watertight, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of philosophers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the focus of the aesthetic encounter shifted to subjective experience and objective criteria became less important (Dickie, 1997). Nevertheless the paradox retains some relevance for contemporary aesthetic philosophers (Osborne, 1979b; Schaper, 1983), and some have attempted to show that evaluation at least has objective elements to it (Railton, 1998). Additionally the

antinomy of taste has informed the work of some sociologists (Bourdieu, 1986) and has specifically been explored within the notion of fashion (Grunow, 1997). It has also been considered within the field of consumer research, again in the area of fashion and fashionability (Solomon et al., 1984) and, in slightly different form, as part of an argument that discrimination, which necessitates objective criteria, is an essential element of the aesthetic response (Holbrook, 1998).

#### **4.3.4 *The nature of the aesthetic encounter***

Another and distinct perspective on the aesthetic experience has debated whether it is a cognitive, affective or sensory experience. This argument developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century so that Voltaire, for instance, claimed that aesthetic appreciation was a felt response whereas Edmund Burke, maintained that taste is a 'faculty of the mind' - a cognitive process (Schaper, 1983). One could add that, in the work of Kant and others, there is a suggestion that the aesthetic response is essentially sensory (Osborne, 1979b)<sup>5</sup>. This sensory perspective sees 'judgments of aesthetic taste within the field of immediate perceptual awareness rather than [in] discursive cognition' (Osborne, 1979b p. 137). This same division between the cognitive, affective and sensory is also replicated in psychology. Some see aesthetic experience being primarily about cognition – for instance the Gestalt school (Arnheim, 1974; Arnheim, 1988). Others stress the emotional experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Funch, 1997). With others arousal is a key (if not dominant) issue – thus sensation becomes of crucial importance (Berlyne, 1971; Berlyne, 1974).

Connected to this is the issue of pleasure. For early philosophers of aesthetics pleasure was accepted as a part of the aesthetic experience (Hume, 1757/1998). However, since the time of Kant pleasure *per se* has been discounted as part of the encounter (Osborne, 1979b). Rather pleasure became an almost co-incident 'symptom' (1979 p. 137) of the process. Some modern philosophical aestheticians would concur with this (Scruton, 1979), but most psychologists would

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<sup>5</sup> Although Kant acknowledged this possibility, he situated the aesthetic experience firmly within the domain of cognition.

probably accept that pleasure is essential to the experience, whilst not its distinguishing feature. Even so, Funch (1997) has suggested that:

Art appreciation from a psycho-physical point of view is centered on a feeling of aesthetic pleasure. The phenomenology of this feeling is seldom studied in depth because it is generally considered to be a purely sensory or sensuous pleasure which is a direct and immediate response to the aesthetic properties of a work (1997 p. 39).

It is therefore an open question whether or not pleasure is a core element of the aesthetic experience.

The final aspect of the aesthetic encounter relevant to this study results from the work of Csikszentmihalyi on the ‘flow experience’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). The flow experience does not just apply to aesthetic engagement but to any autotelic, ludic process on which an individual focuses concentration. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) compare the elements of the flow experience with the work on aesthetic experience of the philosopher Beardsley (1980) and conclude the two analyses are similar. Each stresses the fact that the attention is focused on an object or activity; that the individual becomes insulated from the temporal past or future; that one becomes emotionally detached; that ability is harnessed to overcome intellectual challenge; and that the individual gains a sense of personal development as a result of the experience. It is necessary to stress that this is an analysis of a fairly intense version of aesthetic experience but it has been suggested that it has a relationship to similar psychological ideas, such as Maslow’s concept of peak experiences (Funch, 1997).

#### **4.4 Aesthetic consumption: Some definitions**

Comparatively little work has been done within the discipline of consumer research on the analysis of the aesthetic dimension as a core attribute of a product (as distinct from ancillary aesthetics) and much of what does exist stems from a series of papers by Holbrook<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting at this point two major limitations on research into aesthetic responses. The first is that consumer responses to some art forms (e.g., paintings, photographs and short pieces of music) are easier to assess **in experimental research** than to other, more **lengthy**, art forms (e.g., novels or symphonies). This has almost certainly coloured much of the research process of consumer

Before examining the perspective of consumer researchers in more detail it is again worth clarifying some concepts. The literature within the discipline refers both to ‘aesthetic’ and ‘hedonic’ consumption and the two at times seem to be used synonymously (Holbrook, 1980; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Venkatraman & MacInnis, 1985). Nevertheless, it can be argued that they are distinct. An aesthetic response relates fundamentally to the consumer’s appreciation of beauty (Wagner, 1999). As previously suggested, it is potentially both a cognitive and an affective response and it has been argued that it may also include ‘an involuntary physical response’, that is one which is sensory (Wagner, 1999 p. 134). On the other hand, experiential consumption is about pleasure. Pleasure may be one element of aesthetic appreciation, and that appreciation will almost certainly lead to experiential consumption – but the two are not identical. Compare reading a well-loved book with smoking marijuana. The former has a cognitive element and will result in pleasure; the latter may also result in pleasure, but has no cognitive element, nor any sense of aesthetic appreciation – it merely results from the impact of the narcotic on the brain. One could tentatively develop this idea by suggesting that driving a car fast offers hedonic but not aesthetic pleasure; it is enjoyable but without a sense of beauty.

A second concept crucial to this research is the distinction between aesthetic consumption (the purpose of which is hedonic and experiential) and an aesthetic attribute of a product. A painting may show balance, texture, effective colour and rhythm which are its aesthetic attributes. It may stimulate an awareness of beauty, leading to pleasure which is aesthetic consumption. In some products, such as music on a compact disc, the aesthetic component may be central to the product; in other products the aesthetic component is merely an adjunct to the purpose of the product, as with the styling of white goods (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985).

#### **4.5 Exploring aesthetic consumption**

The area of aesthetic consumption has formed much of the body of theory which has developed around experiential consumption (Ahtola, 1985; Holbrook,

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researchers. Additionally much experimental research has been based on fairly simple stimuli, such

2000; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). It is also relevant to note that aesthetic considerations may be relevant in the presentation of a product, particularly extrinsic cues such as advertising and packaging. That, however, is external to this study. One can suggest, moreover, that as the opus on aesthetic consumption has developed, it has been the psychological approaches to aesthetics, rather than the philosophical, which have had the most immediate impact (Bamossy, 1985; Holbrook, 1980; Holbrook, 1987; Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985). This particularly applies to the influence of the Gestalt approach (Arnheim, 1974; Arnheim, 1988) and psychophysical perspectives (Berlyne, 1971; Berlyne, 1974; Child, 1969), perhaps because they lend themselves more easily to experimental quantification by researchers.

Two decades ago Holbrook (1980) was able to say that consumer researchers had barely any theoretical framework for the analysis of aesthetic consumption, a view later echoed by others (for example Day, 1985). Much of the subsequent analysis of the role and function of aesthetic products arose from the work of Holbrook and his collaborators, springing from an original exploration of experiential consumption (Holbrook, 1982 p. 114).

The most comprehensive of Holbrook's contributions to this analysis was co-authored with Zirlin (1985). Holbrook and Zirlin adopted some of the more philosophical approaches to aesthetics, rather than relying purely on the psychological perspective. Thus they distinguished between an aesthetic object and the process of aesthetic appreciation; the latter, they suggest, does not necessarily require the former in order to occur. They also suggested that 'aesthetic appreciation ranges along a continuum between simple hedonic pleasure and profound' (1985 p. 3). It is worth observing that many philosophers and psychologists tend to focus on the profound rather than the less intense form of aesthetic response and may not accept the concept of a continuum. Crucially, and in distinction to the traditional philosophical approach, Holbrook and Zirlin (1985) also claimed that aesthetic appreciation may be relevant to products which do not necessarily claim the status of an 'artwork'.

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as line drawings and shapes, which could be argued to have limited aesthetic value.

However, Holbrook and Zirlin noted that aesthetic appreciation is ‘an experience that is enjoyed purely for its own sake’ (1985 p. 21). This reflects the philosophical notion of ‘disinterestedness’. Holbrook has taken this further to suggest that aesthetic consumption presupposes an ‘intrinsic’ motivation and must exclude any ‘extrinsic’ motivation; that is, any instrumental use of the aesthetic product to facilitate other, non-aesthetic ends (Holbrook, 1986). The point is certainly accepted as a philosophical tenet and many psychologists also agree with it. It is however questionable as a fundamental proposition of aesthetic consumption and not all philosophers accept it (Dickie, 1964). For the purposes of this study therefore aesthetic consumption is defined to presuppose that the intrinsic motivation to consume is the primary motivation and that there is no substantial utilitarian purpose. However, there may be some secondary, symbolic, thus extrinsic, motivation as well.

Holbrook followed up this analysis with a further work supporting his previous conclusions which set out the distinctions between traditional consumer research and research into aesthetic products (Holbrook, 1987). These distinctions include the focus on consumption rather than selection of a product to purchase and an emphasis on emotional rather than merely cognitive processes. Additionally he recommended a Gestalt approach, focusing on the totality of the aesthetic product, as its aesthetic impact may be more than the sum of its parts.

Holbrook has suggested that the intensity, unity and variety of the aesthetic experience are important. Further, he also pointed out that aesthetic product categories tend to be highly fragmented (Holbrook, 1980) and that aesthetic products usually have an ‘especially large number of product variants from any given manufacturer’ (Holbrook, 1982 p. 115). His analysis was related subsequently to work on the understanding of quality with the idea that quality assessment links essentially experiential concepts such as beauty and fun to preference (Holbrook & Corfman, 1985). Ultimately Holbrook’s work led him to focus on experiential consumption as a fundamental concept (Holbrook, 1998; Holbrook, 1999b). However, in passing it has also resulted in specific analyses of the aesthetic component of brand image (Holbrook, 1983), the impact of the tempo of music on consumer purchase behaviour (Anand & Holbrook, 1986) and the impact of age and gender on the formation of taste (Holbrook & Schindler, 1994). Much of Holbrook’s

work however has been on products with a high aesthetic component such as movies (1999b) or music (1982; 1994), rather than products which have both aesthetic and utilitarian components.

Other researchers have contributed to the growing understanding of aesthetic products. It has been suggested that aesthetic products entail a certain level of cognitive complexity (Wallendorf, Zinkhan, & Zinkhan, 1980), although excessive complexity may inhibit a positive response (Huber & Holbrook, 1980). The evaluation of these products may be considered to be quasi-objective, especially where there is some consensus about their value (Solomon et al., 1984). (Note, however, the underlying assumption in much consumer research into aesthetic goods that their evaluation is necessarily subjective and individual (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985; Wagner, 1999; Wallendorf, 1980)). It has also been observed that in Western cultures (though not necessarily in others) aesthetic behaviour is seen to be distinct from ordinary behaviour (Day, 1985). Critically however, it has been suggested that products which are dominantly hedonic and aesthetic are more closely related to positive affective states than products which are essentially utilitarian (Mano & Oliver, 1993). It has also been suggested that the value of the product to the consumer, the experience and skill needed to evaluate it and the intensity of the affective response all operate in tandem (Bloch et al., 2003). This suggests that the importance of an aesthetic product type to the consumer and his or her ability to judge it have a close relationship.

As the specific research of Holbrook and others has thus shown, there is a close link between the experiential consumption of a product displaying 'beauty' and the judgments which inform that consumption and which comprise the aspects of appreciation, quality evaluation and taste. The former provides a context for and the latter the outworking of aesthetic consumption.

#### **4.6 Aesthetic consumption and aesthetic products**

For the purposes of this review and on the basis of the foregoing, aesthetic consumption is summarised as follows; crucially it involves the use of a product primarily (though not exclusively) for the appreciation of its beauty. It is a form of experiential consumption, but is not coterminous with all experiential consumption,

involving as it does a more substantial cognitive element than many forms of experiential consumption whilst still stimulating affective responses. Aesthetic consumption also tends to produce high involvement levels in some consumers (dealt with in more detail in chapter 3, section 4.4). It has a strong symbolic element, comprising both inner-directed elements (dealing with one's sense of identity and self-development) and an outer directed focus (conveying messages to those around us). Additionally aesthetic appreciation can exist on a continuum from 'hedonic experience' (pleasure) through to profound aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic product is harder to define than the aesthetic consumption experience but it has perhaps four fundamental criteria. First, it must have aesthetic considerations as a primary, rather than a secondary, purpose. That is, the aesthetics are indispensable to the consumption purpose, rather than marginal, as they are with product styling. Second, the product must be designed to stimulate aesthetic consumption. Thus it must have dimensions that, in the widest sense, can be considered beautiful by a number of consumers. As argued later (chapter 3, section 6.4) these may include elements of intensity, variety and complexity, and integration. The third criterion is that the product is capable of providing intrinsic value. That means that it is capable of being appreciated entirely for its own sake, rather than merely as a means to an end. Fourth, aesthetic products exist in a highly fragmented market. Additionally one may hypothesise that an aesthetic product can be susceptible to some form of consensus about its 'objective' value. However, this is a more debatable point, and it exists in tension with the opposite – subjectivist - view that the appreciation of art is essentially a function of personal taste.

This is a broad definition. It was noted by Holbrook and Hirschman (1980 p. 1) that an aesthetic product can include such disparate productions as Shakespeare's plays and the Waltons. More precisely, an aesthetic product includes both mass culture and 'high art' (Levy, Czepiel, & Rook, 1980). Wine certainly seems to fall within the definition being primarily designed for aesthetic consumption, with the utilitarian motivation to consume tending to be secondary; being produced to display beauty in the widest definition of the term; and often being consumed intrinsically. However, given the philosophical dispute about whether or not intrinsic consumption (disinterested attention) is essential for an aesthetic product, and the disagreement about whether or not wine is capable of being an aesthetic product, for the purposes



of this study wine will be defined as a quasi-aesthetic product. This places wine in the category of ‘substantially aesthetic’ (figure 2.2), but acknowledges - depending on the occasion - a major social and even utilitarian purpose to its consumption. In this regard it might be grouped together with clothing, meals, perhaps cheese and probably perfume. This categorisation of wine also acknowledges the impact of alcohol on the body and the possibility of abuse - a factor which will not generally apply to music or other forms of ‘high art’.

## **5 Why wine?**

Wine is an ideal product for an examination of the role of the aesthetic dimension in product quality evaluation and the consideration of the relationship between aesthetic and physical evaluation. It is worth examining the distinctive nature of wine as a product to see this.

1. Wine is both a basic beverage and a premium product (Charters, 2002). It may be sold as a bulk product as cask wine in Australia or *en vrac* (out of the barrel) in France, at perhaps \$2.50 per litre or less. It is also sold as a premium product, both as a commodity (at \$5-25 per bottle) and as a luxury good, fetching prices of up to \$11,000 per case for current release wine (Seckford Wines, 2001), and, the highest price ever, £105,000 at auction for a single bottle (Anon, 2003b). One can therefore posit that its consumption purpose can be almost entirely physical or utilitarian for the cheapest wines, substantially aesthetic for the most expensive, and some combination of the two for commodity wines (Charters, 2002). Note, however, that even expensive wines may have a purely utilitarian purpose when purchased for the purpose of investment.
2. It is also a product surrounded by an arcane form of appreciation – tasting - with a (potentially) high aesthetic attribute component. As suggested, it is considered by some to be a work of art (Amerine & Roessler, 1976) and some philosophers have argued that it is susceptible to aesthetic evaluation (Gale, 1975; Railton, 1998).
3. It is a product for which, within certain categories (premium/luxury table wine), product consistency is explicitly not sought. The pursuit by aficionados of wines from certain regions (like Bordeaux, Burgundy, Coonawarra and Margaret River)

is not just the search for regional variation in wine style but also differing expressions of the product resulting from vintage variation. As the weather in these regions fluctuates from year to year, so the style of wine changes, often by the most subtle of nuances. These distinctions may be highly prized for their diversity, even though some vintages are perceived to be of higher quality than others. In this respect wine is perhaps unique as a product, for although some particular wines (such as sherry and champagne) are sold for their consistency from year to year, such consistency is not inevitably a key to quality and may even be eschewed by consumers.

4. Wine, again probably uniquely, has developed official and quasi-official categorisation systems to 'guarantee' and to grade the quality of the product. These are the appellations of Europe (Hanson, 2000; Norman, 1996; Robinson, 1999), which determine 'quality' by conformance to origin, and various classification systems (which grade wine) operating in places as diverse as Bordeaux and Australia (Markham, 1998; Oliver, 2000). The European systems are enshrined in national and European Union law.
5. Like most aesthetic products wine is part of a highly fragmented market (Holbrook, 1980). A moderately sized bottle store in Australia may have 750 different wines – and a large store will have many thousands. Choice therefore becomes a key element of the purchase process. Excluding 'high' art, only a few other products – such as popular music, women's clothing and perfumes (all of which have a distinct if not dominant aesthetic dimension (Holbrook 1982 p. 115)) – offer such fragmentation.

There are also other factors which, whilst not making wine distinctive as a product, mean that it is ideally placed for this kind of exploratory examination. First, it is potentially subject to regular repeat purchase. This means that attribute evaluation is important to the continued success of a brand. Additionally and crucially the quality evaluation of wine can be performed without extrinsic cues – such as price, brand or packaging - and solely based on attributes and intrinsic cues. The relevant intrinsic cues for wine certainly include colour and (in sparkling wines) mousse and may also comprise oak (Lockshin & Rhodus, 1993) and site of origin.

## 6 Notes on terminology

This study covers wine consumption and connected aspects of consumer behaviour and aesthetics. Some of the terminology used has varying meanings. Definitions are as follows:

- ***Aesthetic***. That which relates to the ideas, evaluations and emotions resulting from our response to objects which stimulate a sense of beauty in us (after Blackburn, 1994).
- ***Taste*** (substantive) is used technically. It comprises both the aromatic qualities of a product (i.e., those detected at the olfactory bulb) as well as those sensed by taste buds on the tongue, and texturally in the mouth (such as tannin, or alcohol).
- ***Personal taste*** (substantive) relates to the aesthetic context. Within the field of aesthetics ‘taste’ is generally used to mean the objective or quasi-objective process of evaluating an object aesthetically. In this study, however, that process is referred to as ‘aesthetic evaluation’. Personal taste is used more generally to cover an individual’s personal preference for an object, which may, or may not, include some more formal process of aesthetic evaluation.
- ***Taste, tasting*** (verb) is used to describe the process of analysing a product (generally wine) organoleptically. It includes not only the aromatic and gustatory analysis of a wine, but also a visual assessment of its appearance.

The study examines the approach to consumption and wine quality of consumers and also professionals, engaged in production and distribution. Accordingly the following descriptive categories are utilised:

- ***Consumers***: Wine drinkers who are members of the public.
- ***Professionals***: Two reference groups, which are:
  - ***Mediators***: A ‘catch-all’ term for those involved in linking wine to the consumer. It includes distributors (wholesalers and retailers), brand managers, wine writers, show judges (when not otherwise employed in the wine production industry), importers and sommeliers.
  - ***Producers***: All those who have a hand in making wine. This generally means winemakers (who may or may not also be the owner of the winery concerned)

but also viticulturists and grape growers (collectively referred to in the study as viticulturists).

- ***Drinkers***: All types of wine drinkers including both consumers and professionals.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY IN WINE**

#### **1 Introduction to the wine industry perspective**

The 'wine industry' comprises a range of functions and therefore of perspectives. There are those who are involved in production, a major part of the industry in Australia, which includes viticulturists, winemakers and oenological researchers and consultants, as well as analysts and technicians. There are also those involved in the many aspects of distribution – including wine writers and critics. Because Australia is a wine producing country the wine industry perspective tends to be dominated by producers, but in other countries, which do not make wines, distributors and critics may be more important.

Oenologists – who are responsible for educating and advising winemakers - have a tendency to define quality in production management terms. For instance, in the standard Australian textbook on winemaking Rankine (1989) offers a whole chapter on quality control but quality *per se* is nowhere defined. As a technique quality control appears to be the (negative) minimisation of faults, rather than (positively) allowing the natural excellence of the wine to be displayed. This fits into the production management approach, but does not help the average consumer to understand quality. Beyond the idea of faultlessness, some oenologists occasionally offer a slightly broader version (for example Jackson, 1994) suggesting that wine quality is assessed either by its conformity to required external parameters or by assessment of its discrete quality components.

Whilst oenologists have provided some limited definition of wine quality, in the broader context of wine appreciation there is a reluctance to engage with quality as a concept. For example, in the Faber series on world wine regions, which is possibly the most detailed and comprehensive in the English language, over half of the volumes have no indexed reference to quality and no formal discussion of the

concept. The assumption is made that the reader will understand the idea. The emphasis is on the production methods and management techniques adopted to create that undefined quality, or (in Europe) on the legal structures imposed to ensure its manifestation. The Oxford Companion to Wine (Robinson, 1999), which is the classic English language reference work on wine, likewise has no entry on the subject other than in the context of the European legal term ‘quality wine produced from a specified region’ (QWPSR). With QWPSR the concept of quality relates solely to the fact that the wine originates from a demarcated area.

This reluctance to define quality has even been developed, in a wine marketing context, to suggest that quality is an outmoded descriptor when applied to wine (Gardner, 1998). Gardner suggests that ‘the use of the word “quality” has been stretched over the last few years to be near meaningless’ (p. 145). He concludes that ‘the term quality remains contemptible’ (p. 151).

Part of this unwillingness to engage with the topic is the corollary of both a lack of definition of quality and a sense of confusion about the parameters within which quality can be analysed. For some the assessment of wine is an aesthetic process (Amerine & Roessler, 1976). It can also be seen as a subjective process (Peynaud, 1987). On the other hand it may be considered scientifically verifiable and thus objective (Somers, 1998). Gawel (1999), who has spent some time researching how Australian wine show judges perform, confirms this disparity of views about the nature of quality:

To compound matters all judges, no matter how experienced, have slightly different interpretations as to what constitutes quality. Sure, all judges would agree on the general parameters that underlie quality; aroma and flavour intensity, complexity, balance, structure, attractive mouthfeel and length. However judges weight the importance of these differently depending on their experience, training and personal philosophy (p. 24).

This perspective is supported by others who have researched in the field (Cliff & King, 2002).

A number of methods can be adopted to evaluate wine quality. There are those who consider that scientifically analytical approaches are crucial. However, most experts still consider organoleptic assessment more appropriate – which raises issues of tasting and communicating about wine. Additionally there are various

specific correlates of wine quality, and also institutional methods of classifying it. Each of these must be examined in turn. But first it may also be useful to examine how wine critics and commentators categorise wine quality.

## **1.1 Categorising wine quality**

The difficulty faced by wine professionals in establishing quality with their product produces varying approaches. The influential French oenologist, Emile Peynaud, offers one definition:

A very simple, obvious and very clear definition is this: 'The quality of a wine is the totality of its properties, that is to say the properties which render it acceptable or desirable.' In effect it is the totally subjective pleasure provided by drinking the wine which conditions judgment ... Quality only exists in relation to this individual and then only in as far as he has the ability to perceive it and approve it. (Peynaud, 1987 p. 220).

Peynaud's perspective is thus explicitly subjective. Others follow his line, but even some of those who comment on the essentially subjective nature of judging wine still end up wondering if there is not some level of quality that is inherent in the product itself (Noble, 1997).

On the other hand there are those who would approach wine (at least at the luxury end) as a work of art, about which aesthetic judgments should be made. Amerine and Roessler (1976), in one of the standard texts on wine tasting, argue this point:

Aesthetics has to do with the subjective and objective appraisal of works of art: music, art, architecture - and wine (1976 p. 3).

The components [of wine] must complement one another synergistically and excite our aesthetic appreciation (1976 p. 8).

However, whilst occasionally alluded to by other writers (e.g., Jackson, 2002), this approach does not appear to be widely adopted and, critically, has not been developed within any consistent theoretical framework.

An Australian oenologist, Somers (1998; 1999), offers an alternative to the subjective approach. He uses spectrometry to establish the quality of wine as an objective matter related to its chemical composition (discussed further in section 2.2 below).

Some, especially those in the Australian oenological tradition, see two connected issues as being the defining features of objective quality. One is in the negative; the absence of faults (Wright, 2001). This would be accepted by many commentators as at least a precursor to quality, if not part of the core of quality itself (for instance Schuster, 1992). The other approach is to suggest that wine must be 'fit for its purpose' (Beckett & Atkin, 2002). This begs the question of what the purpose is that wine has to be fit for, although at least one recent advocate of this definition – the eminent oenologist Terry Lee - has suggested that preference mapping (see section 3.1.3 below) offers a means of establishing this (Beckett & Atkin, 2002). The development of preference mapping has resulted in a further modification of the definition of quality, that it is a 'wine style that is liked/preferred by a defined population of consumers' (Lee, 2002, quoted in Spurrier, 2002, October). At this point the objective 'fitness for purpose' seems to shade once more into a subjective perspective.

Another commentator, author of an influential book on wine tasting, is more poetic:

Quality, finesse, elegance, breed. The elements are represented by the completeness and balance of the various components. Quality can be assessed by the length of time the flavour lingers in the mouth, by its richness and subtlety and by its aftertaste (Broadbent, 1979 p. 59).

Broadbent concentrates on aspects of the tasting process and offers pointers to quality, without finally pinning down the nature of quality itself.

As observed above, the subjective/objective dichotomous approach to quality is to be found in the perspective of some commentators – and occasionally accepted as a paradox by them (Parker, 1997). It has been suggested that it is important for the wine industry to separate its own perspective on 'real' quality from preference (Penn, 2001). Furthermore there are some who adopt the absolutist perspective (Basset, 2000), whereas others take a relativist position, whether wine is considered relative to its legal quality level within the European QWPSR system (Broadbent, 1979) or relative to the situation of consumption (Gawel, 1999). There is additionally disagreement about whether or not assessment is a matter for consumers – who after all, ultimately determine the success or otherwise of a wine (Peynaud, 1987) - or alternatively if trained judges need to make that decision (Rankine, 1990).



The latter would make it essentially a matter for a professional elite. Additionally there is the question of whether or not quality is innate – thus dependent essentially on grapes produced from a specific site - or if it is acquired, guaranteed by the activity of the winemaker (Peynaud, 1987).

## **2 Scientific processes**

### **2.1 Predicting quality**

Increasingly some oenologists are attempting to use scientific analytical processes in order to try to predict wine quality. Grapes are being analysed by near infrared spectroscopy or by a technique known as GG Assay to determine their composition in an attempt to predict how a wine will turn out (Anon, 2000a; Goldberg, 1997). In one case this has been linked to the final quality of the wine by means of descriptive analysis (see section 3.1.2 below) (Abbott, Combe, & Williams, 1991). The results given by Abbott, Combe and Williams (1991) showed a link between the descriptive analysis and quality; however, the latter was defined not organoleptically by consumers (perceived quality) but in production terms, and by gauging the likely price of the wine. All of these methods make unexpressed assumptions about what wine quality actually is. They are also based on grapes – and the process of moving from grape quality to what is actually sold in the bottle is still multi-stage and subject to many variables.

### **2.2 Chemical analyses of wine**

A number of scientists have sought to analyse the finished product in chemical terms in an effort to determine its quality. An overview of such a perspective was given by Acree and Cotterell (1985). Unlike many other commentators starting from a scientific perspective, they did offer a definition of wine quality, as ‘an estimate of its aesthetic worth by a particular group of humans’ (p. 147). They suggested that faults in wine – which are susceptible to chemical analysis - are only half of the issue of quality. The other is that the wine must offer aesthetic value to those consuming it. They offered no practical, chemical, solution

to this issue, beyond noting that in some countries sugar levels in grapes have been one yardstick of quality and suggesting that odour is the most important facet in the consumer's evaluation of quality. A more precise, albeit complex, attempt to link organoleptic wine quality to an analysis of the products chemical make-up has been offered by Somers (1998; 1999), outlined in detail in appendix 1.

Some consultants have sought to use other methods of chemical analysis to predict wine quality. Thus in the United States, a company called Enologix has produced a computer programme to measure the 'quality metrics' of wine, using a database of existing wines to compare the chemical make-up of a sample and predict its likely market position (Penn, 2001). They define wine quality as the 'colour-flavour-fragrance intensity of a given wine with respect to all the other wines in its appellation (p. 59)'. This, again, is a production-led definition of quality and at present is no more than a guide to likely market position rather than the consumer's perceived quality of the wine. However, even some of those who actively promote methods of chemical analysis accept that the evaluation of quality is ultimately an organoleptic process (Acree & Cottrell, 1985; Jackson, 1994; Linskens & Jackson, 1988).

### **2.3 Vintage data**

An alternative means of seeking scientific validity for an 'objective' means of classifying quality is one which analyses weather patterns at vintage and uses those data to make evaluative predictions (Ashenfelter, Ashmore, & Lalonde, 1995). It has been claimed that this is more accurate than the auction market in its early judgment of the quality of a vintage, and that ultimately auction prices for wine of a specific vintage come to reflect the weather-based analysis (Ashenfelter et al., 1995). This is predominantly a predictive method and has provoked a substantial amount of controversy (Raghunathan, 1999).

## **3 The practice of assessing wine**

Wine is regularly evaluated organoleptically by members of the wine industry. Two related processes are central to this: tasting and communicating.

They cannot be completely divorced because there is evidence that tasting ability is informed by the way language reflects and categorises tasting processes (Brochet, 1999). Nevertheless, for simplicity they will be dealt with separately. Additionally it is necessary to consider the criteria against which wine may be evaluated. There are also issues relating to wine assessment and marketing which are addressed below.

### **3.1 Tasting**

Wine tasting has developed in two parallel fashions, which occasionally interact. There is the very scientific approach to organoleptic assessment, which is the work of chemists and sensory scientists, and there is the professional approach, used informally each day in the winery or the wine store and more formally in organised tastings and shows. The efficacy of tasting as a means of evaluating wine relies on two related issues. The first is assessor accuracy. Potentially both physiological and psychological factors may impede the taster's analysis (Brien, May, & Mayo, 1987; Gawel, 1999; Lawless, 1984; 1985). Second is the assessor's frame of reference. What criteria are used to make the judgments of wine and wine quality? (Jackson, 1994). There may be (1) evaluative criteria that could be used as benchmarks, so that a judge may consider the intensity of flavour and its continuing persistence of flavour when the wine is swallowed. Alternatively (2) the judge may rely on his/her recall ability of previously tasted, similar wines which may act as standards (Engen, 1987). Other frameworks may rely on a combination of both approaches – for instance, in parts of Europe a wine may be judged by whether or not it shows *typicité* (how typical the wine is). In that case to display true quality a wine must conform to the expected style of its region of origin, so that both evaluative criteria for judgment, and benchmarks are necessary.

Psychologists and sensory scientists involved in the formal development of organoleptic tasting have established three forms of sensory test: difference tests to assess the dissimilarity of two wines; scaling tests to rank wines or to assess their intensity; and sensory profiling, the most common example of which is descriptive analysis (Eves, 1994). Critically, however, this focused, scientific approach tends ultimately to evolve into a concentration on precise description rather than

qualitative assessment. In fact the process of undertaking such descriptive work may come to preclude hedonic evaluation:

Indeed the sensory panellist should never be asked how much they like a sample, as their training means that they can no longer be considered as typical consumers (Eves, 1994 p. 39).

It should be noted that this exclusive perspective was challenged by one of the earlier proponents of formal sensory analysis who considered preference a valid function of the process (Duerr, 1984).

### ***3.1.1 The psychology and physiology of tasting***

Substantial work on the physiology and psychology of tasting and the analysis of aromatic substances has been carried out, much of it specifically focused on wine or products where the results are transferable to wine, such as perfume. One caveat, however, is relevant. Even where wine expertise is evaluated the focus has been on odour recognition (i.e. olfactory skills). Tasting involves both olfactory skills, and actual (tongue-based) taste. In addition it features tactile (trigeminal) sensations: heat, mousse, weight, astringency and texture. The focus on olfactory processes means that some results may well be limited in their applicability because they ignore these crucial taste and tactile factors.

It has been suggested that there are four aspects of skill needed for tasting, each of increasing complexity (Hughson & Boakes, 2001). They include detection and discrimination between compounds; detection of elements in a compound; verbal descriptions; and categorical judgements about wine. In principle the more complex processes require more advanced skills and experience.

Some preliminary comments about tasting can be made which apply both to experts and amateurs. Traditionally good tasting is thought to depend on advanced perceptual skills. However, recent research has challenged this idea. Rather, expertise ‘appears to develop on the basis of experience with wine-related compounds rather than reflect some generally superior sensory ability’ (Hughson & Boakes, 2001 p. 104). Therefore wine tasters have skills related to wine – not to general sensory evaluation (Parr, 2002). It is also clear that there is uneven sensory awareness both in a single person and between people, and that this unevenness relates both to olfactory perception (Woods, 1998) and the sense of taste (Peynaud,

1987). Additionally, at the point where tasting and preference intersect, it has been noted that predilections can last a lifetime yet may also change a number of times (Clark, 1998). Crucially, enjoyment lies not in the aroma itself but in our interaction with it; thus pleasure is partly about our personal perspective (Engen, 1988).

In general, for most people who taste wine it seems that categorisation of aromas is by smell, not language. Thus 'one does not retrieve an odor episode with words, but with odor' (Engen, 1987 p. 501). As a result there is a split between verbal ability and tasting skill. This tends to produce a 'tip of the nose' experience, where an aroma is recognised but cannot be categorised (Engen, 1987; Lawless, 1985). Further, people have a limited ability to identify a number of different aromas at one time (Lawless, 1985). Indeed, it has been suggested that focusing on labelling an aroma may actually impede recognition in some situations (Parr, 2002). There may also be some gender differences in tasting wine. It has, for instance, been reported that males have a negative preference for wines with greater aromatic complexity (of relevance to the issue of aesthetic evaluation) while females show greater preference for familiar odours (Jellinek & Kloster, 1983).

Some specific comments can be made about tasting by wine experts. They are more disciplined in their approach to tasting (Hughson & Boakes, 2001). They are, as one would expect, better at discriminating between wines (Solomon, 1990). They appear to have the ability to suspend personal preference in favour of 'objective' evaluation methods (McBride, 1990). When tested as a group the accuracy and unanimity of expert tasting panels appears good (Lawless, Liu, & Goldwyn, 1997).

[Experts] can also bring to bear their conceptual knowledge about wines. In particular, they possess explicit knowledge of the set of qualities that tend to cluster together in a wine from a given type of grape, and this may affect their perception and description of a given wine sample (Hughson & Boakes, 2001 p. 105).

Thus experts, having judged what a wine is, use their expectations of that wine to reach various conclusions about it. This conceptual knowledge, as distinct from perceptual skills, may be important in developing their tasting expertise as it allows for nuanced categorisation of wines (Hughson & Boakes, 2002). In essence, experts may taste synthetically, rather than analytically (Gawel, 1997).

Additionally there is some evidence that where judges first score a wine and then try to reach agreement about its merits, they achieve more consensus than when they merely score and those scores are averaged (Cliff & King, 2002). The discussion may fine tune their results, causing a re-evaluation which results in greater precision. Discussion certainly produces a greater spread of scores over a range of wines than averaging does (Cliff & King, 2002). In any event it seems that even for judges, the fewer the number of wines they have to deal with the more likely that consensus will be reached (Cliff & King, 2002).

Research has been carried out recently on mapping the effectiveness of judges' tasting skills (King, Hall, & Cliff, 2001). However, and crucially for a group which prides itself on its ability to give comprehensive and wide-ranging aromatic descriptions, it seems that even experts are only able to identify three or four elements at most in a mixture of aromatic components (Livermore & Laing, 1996). It may therefore be that expert wine tasters, although they can only sense a few specific aromas in a wine, use those as prompts to look for other expected aromas (Hughson & Boakes, 2002). Thus, if one smells white pepper and spice on a red wine, the conclusion is that it is shiraz and thus one looks for, and 'finds', mulberry, plum, black olive, leather and cedar <sup>1</sup>. There are other constraints on the effectiveness of tasting by experts. As well as variable sensitivity (already noted), situation, subjective preference and habituation (becoming accustomed to the components in similar wines) may all have an influence (Merritt, 1997).

The interaction of language and tasting is also important. It has been noted that giving names to unfamiliar aromas enhances the ability to distinguish between them. Thus a broad vocabulary is not just about communication but about higher discriminatory skills (Rabin & Cain, 1984). Connected to this, a good description of a wine can improve the recognition of aromas (Rabin & Cain, 1984; Solomon, 1990). As a consequence there is an association between wine expertise and language use (Solomon, 1990), as evidenced by the fact that experts tend to offer more complex descriptions of wines (Hughson & Boakes, 2001). However, where there is a gap

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<sup>1</sup> This is one area where the focus on olfactory skills may skew findings. As well as aroma, a taster analysing shiraz will be considering bitterness, acidity, tannin, weight and alcohol. These will have an impact on its assessment but will probably not be detectable by smell.

between perceptual skill (tasting) and verbal expertise, ‘verbal overshadowing’ may occur; that is, attempting to use words to describe a wine may actually interfere with the recall of a smell or a taste (Melcher & Schooler, 1996).

### **3.1.2 *Descriptive analysis***

To overcome the possible variations and inconsistencies inherent in tasting methods, a more ‘scientific’ method of sensory evaluation (used across a range of foodstuffs) has been developed. This is ‘descriptive analysis’ (Merritt, 1997; Noble, 1988). Noble claims that ‘Sensory evaluation is a scientific discipline used to evoke, quantitate, analyze and interpret reactions to the characteristics of wines as perceived by the senses of sight, smell, taste, and touch’ (1988 p. 9). In order to gain accurate assessment of a food product, trained evaluators must be used who adopt common benchmarks for appraisal. Generally these judges have a specific task, such as determining whether or not there is a difference between products, and if so, what it is and its intensity.

It is worth noting that Noble (1988), like Eves (1994), distinguishes descriptive analysis, which aims merely to record what a wine is like, from the assessment of quality itself. The latter she places in the category of ‘hedonic evaluation’. Indeed she suggests that quality evaluation is ‘only one isolated and, in fact, poor example of the activity’ of sensory evaluation (1988 p. 9). As a result other methods have been developed, particularly preference mapping, in an attempt to assess hedonic preference more precisely.

### **3.1.3 *Preference mapping***

Preference mapping was originally developed to assess consumer preference for foods generally (Clark, 1998), and bears some relationship to the idea of preference testing, first developed as a marketing tool in the late 1950s (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). Essentially preference mapping works by having a group of wines assessed by a large number of consumers who evaluate them on a simple hedonic scale. Some of the consumers are then trained in formal descriptive analysis methods. These methods are then used to ‘map’ the wines graphically on a grid using the descriptors agreed by the panel as anchors, allowing the wines to be grouped into styles (Clark, 1998; Lesschaeve, Lee, & Norris, 2002). The popularity

of the wines can then be matched to the map of styles and winemakers can shape future wines to mirror the popular styles. This is a complex procedure but could be of great value to large companies with substantial resources. It has been adopted by the world's second largest wine producer, E&J Gallo (Lesschaeve et al., 2002).

Preference mapping is one method by which the concept of 'fitness for purpose' as a definition of wine quality can be directly linked to the ultimate perspective a drinker may have on a wine (Beckett & Atkin, 2002). It does, however, retain a distinctively utilitarian view on quality, which is seen as the preference of the largest single group of consumers (and not even necessarily of the majority).

Another method of assessing preference for wine is based on time-intensity curves (the intensity of flavour plotted against the length of time the flavour remains) (Australian Wine Research Institute, 1998). This, however, is a very limited quantitative form of assessing preference, adopts no verbal explanation of how good a wine may be, and assumes consumers seek flavour length.

### **3.2 Communicating about wine**

The second area which presents a problem when assessing wine quality is the communication of that assessment. Consider the following, quoting Genevieve Janssens, the chief winemaker of Robert Mondavi Wines:

'[The] To Kalon vineyard has very big tannins, the oak fermentors sculpt those tannins. The wines are very lean, very zen.' (Alloway, 2001 p. 34).

The comment includes simple description ('big tannins'), an aesthetic metaphor, a human metaphor, and the philosophical allusion that the wines are 'very zen'. Even an experienced wine taster may baulk at the last comment. Those with a little experience may understand the first two or three suggestions, and a novice may have some idea about what 'big tannins' are, but little else. Communication about wine needs to be clear.

This issue of communicating about wine comprises two parts - how do we understand what others are saying about wine and how do we convey our quality judgments in an understandable language? These two factors are distinct, although



interrelated, as it is our personal and prior verbal categorisation of the components of a wine which informs our ability to assess the impact of those components.

It has been suggested that words about wine are regularly misinterpreted (Lehrer, 1974). Some experiments (on groups of novice and expert wine tasters) have suggested that even though they may use the same words tasters utilise them with different meanings from those imparted to the same words by other tasters (Lehrer, 1974; Lehrer, 1983). Lehrer concluded that, even for expert tasters, communication is more about social interaction than conveying information. Talking about wine offers ‘phatic communion’ – speech which binds people socially rather than a precise exchange of knowledge (Lehrer, 1974). Lehrer noted in passing, however, that more knowledgeable tasters do use more words (Lehrer, 1974). She also pointed out that some words are very value laden. ‘Dry’ is perceived to be a positive descriptor, whereas ‘sweet’ is often negative. Different tasters will label a wine dry or sweet based not on their sensory evaluation of it (and irrespective of its level of residual sugar) but on their liking or disliking of it. This perspective has been confirmed by research within the domain of wine marketing (Judica & Perkins, 1992), which explicitly linked the term dry to higher quality.

Others have disagreed with Lehrer’s methodology and therefore with her conclusions, at least as far as the language used by expert tasters is concerned (Lawless, 1984; 1985), although the point has been made that even experts can be idiosyncratic in their use of wine terms (Lawless, 1984). Solomon (1990) concludes that experts, at least, do understand the terms used by their peers and also analyse wines more precisely.

Suffice it to say that, at the level of performance, wine experts were associated both with more precise discrimination and more precise use of language ... They could agree significantly at ranking wines on the dimensions of tannin, balance, and sweetness where novices could only rank the wines for sweetness (Solomon, 1990).

Gawel (1997) assessed the communication skills of two groups of wine professionals: oenology students trained formally in sensory evaluation and untrained hospitality and wine distribution workers. They tasted wines and had to write descriptions of the wines and match the wines to descriptions written by the others. The students more accurately (and significantly above chance) both

produced better descriptions of the wines and matched wines to descriptions written by others. They also relied more on abstract descriptive terms (such as balance and length) and less on concrete elements of the wines such as tactile and flavour intensity descriptions. This, together with the impact of language on the conceptual skills of experts already noted (section 3.1.1), suggests that, at least between experts, some common wine language exists.

How do we convey our own quality judgments in an understandable language? Work on smell recognition suggests that human memory for odours is good but the association with words is low which often results in an inability to name a recalled smell (Engen, 1987). There have been specific attempts to overcome this split between recognition and articulation for wine. These include development of: the 'aroma wheel', a result of Noble's work on descriptive analysis, outlined above (Noble et al., 1987); time/intensity curves; and points systems – common in varying forms in most parts of the vinous world (Australian Wine Research Institute, 1998).

However, the conclusion that there is a language for wine which is commonly understood by experts has been challenged recently. Brochet (2001; Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001) claims to have analysed not the lexicon of wine experts but the structure of their language. He then investigated the co-occurrence of words (essentially a form of linguistic cluster analysis), producing between two and five common 'fields' for each expert analysed. He concluded that:

In looking at most of the word fields it is clear that they mix together visual, olfactory, taste, trigeminal, hedonistic and idealistic descriptive terms which cannot all strictly be considered to be part of a tasting vocabulary (Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001 p. 190).

The fields therefore mix both 'hard' descriptors with more general terms. Thus one taster who was analysed, the well-known American critic Robert Parker, had terms such as great, elegance and 'no filtration' in the same field. This intermixed the evaluative, the descriptive ('elegant') and production methods (Brochet, 2001). Even though filtration is not a tasting term 'it seems that knowledge of [this] element influences representation' (Brochet & Dubourdieu, 2001 p. 8). Thus, Brochet concludes, each taster uses terms idiosyncratically - there is little crossover between tasters. Only the terms 'dark' and 'blackcurrant' were used by three of the five tasters scrutinised. What appears to be an objective, analytical process may in fact be a

prototypical one that is based on comparison rather than analysis and on preference rather than objectivity. This essentially returns to the original conclusions of Lehrer (1974) a quarter of a century earlier.

### ***3.2.1 Communication between experts and amateurs***

The importance of experts being able to convey ideas about wine to non-professionals as part of the marketing and education process has been acknowledged (Gawel, 1997; Robichaud & Owens, 2002). By inference one could even conclude that the reverse, communication from consumer to expert, may be important. The issue of the ability of experts to convey their evaluations to non-professional wine drinkers is one which has been alluded to in some research (Gawel, 1997; Solomon, 1990). Nevertheless, it has rarely been investigated in detail, with most study being carried out within rather than between groups such as novices or experts (e.g., Lawless, 1984). Solomon, who has considered this issue of communication between groups, suggested that:

Expert and novice wine tasters may even constitute linguistic communities, with the language of one community not completely translatable into the language of the other (Solomon, 1997 p. 41)

Solomon's research did not directly answer the question of how well experts communicate with consumers. Instead he concluded that experts use much more complex methods to categorise wines than novices, and that they may be approaching wines conceptually rather than perceptually. However, even by just having more complex methods of categorisation one could surmise that the structures underlying the language of wine might be fundamentally different. Certainly, as one newspaper report has suggested, consumers do not necessarily agree with expert descriptions (Stavro, 2001). According to the report, a judge at the Sydney Wine Show praised the top red wine as 'an ultra-ripe cabernet-based wine, but more of an Australian ripe fruit wine, with tastes of blackberry jam, liquorice and sweet fruit'. This prompted the following responses from four consumers chosen at random and given the wine to taste: 'it's too fruity. The mix of flavours is so potent you can't tell one from another'; 'I can't tell if it's blackberry or any other fruit'; 'I would say it's more woody than fruity'; 'It's not very fruity' (Stavro, 2001 p. 3). From a marketing perspective this view about the failure to communicate is shared by Lockshin

(2002a). He suggests that the fact that professionals are also themselves high-involvement consumers means that they unduly influence public discussion about wine quality. This is at the expense of low-involvement consumers, who are, as a majority of consumers, much more important to the wine industry.

### **3.3 The criteria for wine quality**

It is worth prefacing any discussion about the wine industry's own criteria for assessing wine quality by noting the wide range of vocabulary adopted. Each authority tends to have his or her own favourite terms, often carefully graded according to their perceptions of the varying quality of wines being examined. For example, the following terms are regularly used: good, fine and great (Broadbent, 1979), class (Stevenson, 2000), profound (Parker, 1997), sound or special (Schuster, 1992).

Those who claim that wine drinking involves a process of assessment inevitably need to construct relevant guidelines by which it can be evaluated. As noted earlier, writers on wine suggest a number of features of wine which they argue reveal its quality. These include balance, complexity, length, personality or distinctiveness, intensity of flavour and purity (Amerine & Roessler, 1976; Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Jackson, 2002; Peynaud, 1987; Thompson, 2000a). It should, however, be stressed that this apparent unanimity is not absolute. An alternative and fairly extreme perspective has been given by a New Zealand wine judge, Dr. G. Watson, who has argued that as long as a wine is fault-free then the benchmark by which it should be assessed is how faithfully it reproduces its varietal character (Merritt, 1997).

Another point worth making is that there is a tendency for wine critics to confuse these organoleptic product attributes (like length, or complexity) with quality itself. It can be argued, however, that the quality of a wine lies not in its complexity or balance but in the engagement of consumption and the pleasure which such attributes engender. The consumer does not ultimately swallow for intensity or length, but for the hedonic response which results from the wine. It is in that experiential process that quality is ultimately determined. Peynaud (1987) suggested this when he listed pleasure as the first of his determinants of quality. Amerine and

Roessler (1976) concurred, saying ‘what is the difference between an ordinary wine and a great wine? The first principle is pleasure’ (1976 p. 6). They developed it further:

All truly fine wines produce feelings other than mere pleasure. There is a sense of awe. We say that the wine is balanced, but in a truly great wine there is more than just balance ... A great wine should have so many facets of quality that we are continually finding new ones. It is this complexity that enables us to savor a wine without losing our interest in it (1976 p. 8).

Some commentators therefore go beyond the organoleptic attributes in an attempt to define the core of quality itself. This is not a universal nor even a common approach, however.

## **4 Classifying wine quality**

One can categorise the methods of classifying and assessing wine quality as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic quality relates to the wine-in-the-glass; thus, to what is tasted. Extrinsic classification methods make use of factors extraneous to the wine in an attempt to establish its quality.

### **4.1 Intrinsic classifications**

Intrinsic forms of wine classification are based solely on the wine as it is tasted. The tasting is then interpreted in the context of grades – normally in the form of marks. This process is a common worldwide practice, but it is not universally popular. Scores may be blindly followed by consumers, who are known to refuse to buy wines at less than, say, 95 marks out of a 100 (Walker, 2002). Points, it has been argued, are of limited use without words to describe and amplify (Australian Wine Research Institute, 1998). A ‘single composite score purportedly reflecting wine quality’ it has been suggested, is potentially limited, for as ‘quality is an inherently multidimensional construct there is obviously scope for considerable variation in a composite score’ (Brien et al., 1987 p. 1279). Additionally many wine commentators are ignorant of the potential statistical errors inherent in the process. The famous ‘California versus France’ tasting of 1976 which concluded that Californian wines were ‘better’ than prestigious French labels has been shown to be

based on a statistical error, and in fact probably the reverse result would have been more accurate (Ashenfelter & Quandt, 1999; Lindley, 1999).

#### **4.1.1 *Wine shows***

One form of evaluation which purports to be objective is provided by wine shows. Wine show systems tend to operate in both wine producing and consuming countries. The Australian system (possibly the best developed and most cohesive in the world) centres around agricultural society shows, with the metropolitan wine shows being the most important. Wines are assessed in classes (for instance chardonnay, or lighter bodied red wines), and may be awarded gold, silver, or bronze medals. Wines are marked discretely – so that conceivably all the wines in a class could win gold, or none could win any medals. The system was originally intended to encourage the exchange of ideas and experience amongst wine makers, to give consumers some idea of the quality of the best wines, and to allow producers a marketing opportunity for their wines. There are, however, increasing concerns about various aspects of wine shows which bear on the validity of their results (Dunphy & Lockshin, 1998; Halliday, 2001; Hooke, 2001), and particularly the fact that the speed of tasting required is no way to engage with quality (Jefford, 2002). However, these criticisms are not universally accepted by those involved in the judging process (Croser, 2001). Also, as has been noted, professional judgments at shows may not necessarily be accepted by consumers (Stavro, 2001). Even professionals may have doubts about the usefulness of wine shows as a means of conveying quality judgments to consumers (Dunphy & Lockshin, 1998) and some research suggests that endorsements such as show medals are comparatively unimportant in influencing consumer choice (Shaw et al., 1999).

Whilst proposals have been made for research into the efficacy of judging (Brien et al., 1987; Cliff & King, 1996), there has been little actual exploration of the process. A number of academic criticisms of the process of judging have been made. These include: the failure of judges to deliver reproducible results; the fact that judges place varying emphasis on different components of the wines; that wine colour will prejudice their judgment; and the inherent malleability of their views when discussing wines (Noble, 1997). Additionally the criticisms of scoring generally, as detailed above, also apply to wine shows.

#### **4.1.2 *The role of gatekeepers***

The role of gatekeepers, or ‘opinion formers’, in influencing the market is important in the wine industry (Gawel, 1997). Gatekeepers use various ways of categorising quality and of conveying their evaluation of wine to consumers. Their perspective may well shape how consumers view quality. It has been suggested that the outstanding success of one American critic is due to the fact that his categorisation of wines is predicated on a very simple good/bad dichotomous method, which is similar to the approach of novice drinkers (Brochet, 2001).

One system for the evaluation of wine is offered by wine magazines or experts. These again are mediator based and include the 100 point system of the ‘*Wine Spectator*’ and ‘*The Wine Advocate*’, the five star system of *Winestate*, or the marks out of twenty awarded by the *Australian Gourmet Traveller Wine Magazine*. Each system has its advocates and critics but each purports to advise the consumer of the perceived quality of a wine (as judged by an individual expert or a panel of experts). Whilst these processes may give consumers some comfort (they project the air of objectivity) they are also of questionable accuracy (Merritt, 1997). Expert assessments may vary from tasting to tasting, and experts may differ in their assessment. For instance, a paired tasting of identical wines, matching six experts in London with six in New York, produced noticeably different quality assessments from each panel – with the suggestion that part at least of the variation was attributable to ‘national’ differences in taste (Stimpfig, 1999). A follow-up test setting British experts against Californians suggested fewer differences but some noticeable divergences – for instance the British selection as the third best wine was placed sixteenth by the Californians (Cass, 2000). The other criticisms of judging, made above, may also apply generally to these cases.

One can note that on occasions highly involved consumers may also act as opinion-formers (Goldsmith & d'Hautville, 1998). Indeed there are many examples of wine writers and show judges who are not employed in the wine industry such as Ray Jordan, columnist for the *West Australian*, and John Hanley, former chair of the judges at the Royal Perth Wine Show.

## 4.2 Extrinsic evaluation systems

Whereas intrinsic classificatory systems are based on tasting, extrinsic systems use other criteria to establish quality – principally origin or price. Historically there have been regular attempts to grade wine in this way. These run from the Roman prototype of ‘classed growths’<sup>2</sup>, headed by Falernian (Phillips, 2000) to the development of the formal *cru classé* system in Bordeaux in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Markham, 1998). Broadly one can split such attempts to grade wine into two types. There are those which solely rely on geography, the origin of the grapes, to impart an assumed quality (which tend to be producer-led systems). Alternatively there are systems which grade wines by some external method of evaluating and classifying wines and which tend to be organised by the merchants, critics and marketers of wine.

### 4.2.1 Origin: *appellation* systems

The idea that origin is a key to quality crystallised in France in the post-*phylloxera* era<sup>3</sup> (Vandour, 2002), making the notion perhaps little more than 125 years old, at least in its current form. Appellation systems became enshrined in law in France in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to widespread fraud and depression within the viticultural sector. They were an attempt to guarantee the authenticity of the product, assure the consumer about its provenance, and thus improve sales (Phillips, 2000; Unwin, 1996). The *appellation contrôlée* (AC) guarantee of origin was enhanced by other legal restrictions on production methods, intended to assure that quality.

The main aim of all this grading and control is to preserve the authenticity, typicity and quality of AC wines. Before an AC is granted, certain qualifying conditions must be met (Norman, 1996 p. 246 p.).

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<sup>2</sup> A literal translation of the French *cru classé*. Essentially a system by which individual producers or vineyard sites are awarded a grade based on the general perceived quality of the wine they produce.

<sup>3</sup> *Phylloxera* is an insect of American origin which kills European vines by destroying their root system. It was brought to Europe in the early 1860s, spread rapidly and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had devastated most European vineyards. It was ultimately countered by grafting European vines onto rootstocks of American vine species – the latter being resistant to the insect’s predations.



With the creation of the European Economic Community such systems spread to other western European nations. European Union law now stipulates that wines made under such constraints are designated as QWPSR. Wines made outside the specifically demarcated regions, or without following the other legal requirements, may not call themselves quality wine and are instead defined as table wine, and generally forbidden from giving a region of origin or vintage date on their label<sup>4</sup>.

The system, however, has not always delivered all that it has promised. The typicality of a wine in itself does not prove the quality of what one is drinking (Basset, 2000). There are growing criticisms of the system as it operates in France, suggesting that it impedes, rather than enhances, actual product quality (Lombard, 2002). Some have suggested that by replacing the ‘real’ quality of the wine with a superimposed ‘geographic’ condition quality actually deteriorated:

‘We used to buy on quality. The appellation contrôlée legislation caused the quality of Burgundy to fall’ remarked the father of Yves Thomas (of negociant Moillard-Grivot). It is an interesting point, and perhaps true in the short term (Hanson, 2000 p. 94).

The expansion of the QWPSR system to other countries also proved ambivalent in its results. The Italian equivalent of the AC system, the DOC<sup>5</sup>, has been subject to much criticism on the grounds of unreliability and because it had no organoleptic assessment as part of its process. This produced the paradoxical result that many producers seeking to make the very best wines worked outside the national quality system, and ‘in the past thirty years deliberately downgraded their denomination (to *Vino da Tavola*<sup>6</sup>) in order to upgrade quality; hence the “SuperTuscan” and its ilk’ (Belfrage, 1999 p. 23).

This ambivalence is also reflected in variations in the operation of the QWPSR system in different countries. Germany classifies around 95% of its

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<sup>4</sup> The introduction of the category of *vins de pays* in 1979 modified this somewhat.

<sup>5</sup> *Denominazione di Origine Controllata*. The Italian translation of AC, adopted in 1963. Questions over the actual organoleptic quality of the wines which it claimed to assure led to a supposed higher level - *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita* (DOCG) - being created in the early 1980s.

<sup>6</sup> Literally ‘table wine’. Thus, in Europe, below the QWPSR designation.

production as quality wine each year while in France the figure is closer to 40-50% (Robinson, 1999). Such variability cannot be explained by the assertion that more German wine than French wine each year is ‘good’.

Although they do not operate in the same legislatively restrictive fashion, it is clear that the development of demarcation systems in new producing countries are being used to delimit ‘better’ regions. The dispute over inclusion within the boundaries of the Coonawarra region of South Australia is testament to the importance of this (Fish, 2001; Steiman, 2001). Recent research in Australia suggests that region of origin is a fundamental determinant in the purchase decision of many consumers (Tustin & Lockshin, 2001).

#### **4.2.2 Price and classifications**

The most enduring classificatory system has been the 1855 classification of the Médoc, in the region of Bordeaux (Markham, 1998). This was never intended to be permanent (indeed it was merely one of a series of such classifications in the region) but still has a major impact on the world wine market – particularly the secondary (auction) market. Unlike the appellation system, this process was developed not by producers (some of whom actively opposed it) but by the powerful Bordeaux *negociants* – the wine merchants. They used the price that was attained in the early 1850s by each of the *chateaux*<sup>7</sup> to grade them into five categories. At the summit were the four most expensive wines, the *premiers crus* (literally ‘first growths’). At the base were 18 fifth growths. Also, in distinction to the appellation system this classification is not primarily geographically based but is a hierarchy of wines across a number of appellations. The 1855 classification has spawned a number of similar hierarchies in the Bordeaux region but, with the exception of that for St. Emilion, they are not reviewed on a regular basis. Hence the original classification remains, even though some producers have disappeared and others have expanded or varied their vineyard land (Robinson, 1999). It has been suggested that the continuing operation of the 1855 classification runs counter to traditional economic principles. These normally suggest that:

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<sup>7</sup> Literally ‘castle’ – but in practice the prefix adopted almost unanimously by wine producers in the Bordeaux region.

A classification system with no quality control mechanism would be expected to create an incentive for firms to 'free ride' on the quality reputation of the group. However, after 140 years, the premiums accorded wines that were classified in 1855 do not seem to have been dissipated by free riding. The longevity of the value of this classification suggests that firms have found a mechanism to successfully enforce quality standards among the groups' members (Landon & Smith, 1998 p. 342).

Thus 'quality' is maintained amongst the group classified even though the natural tendency of its members would be to coast on the reputation provided by the initial classification. It is likely that the key participants in the Médoc have some other driving force which pushes them to maintain the 'quality' level of their wine.

The Médoc classification has been replicated in a similar fashion in Australia, with the Langton's 'Classification of Distinguished Australian Wines'. Langton's is an auction house which has constructed its classification based on the price attained by Australian wines on the domestic secondary market – thus on the price consumers attach to a specific wine. The system was inaugurated in 1991 comprising 34 wines, with its third revision in 2000 including 89 wines. The process is not without criticism, specifically because it involves classifying on price rather than perceived quality and is alleged to use arbitrary criteria for its judgments (Oliver, 2000).

#### **4.2.3 Hedonic pricing**

Hedonic pricing has its origins in economics and exemplifies one of the four approaches to quality summarised by Steenkamp (1989). Essentially it developed as a means to determine consumers' relative evaluation of various attributes of a product. Price is regressed against these attributes, enabling them to be quantified and their relative importance to be established. In principle this then allows them to be a gauge of quality for the consumer who can weight the relative importance of each attribute. It was originally applied to wine in Australia (Oczkowski, 1994), producing the results that sparkling wine, pinot noir based wines and sweet wines are likely to be more expensive than others. This is an unsurprising conclusion, given that the production of each of these tends to be more costly than commercial table wine styles.

The theoretical basis and practical efficacy of the hedonic pricing of wine has been questioned by Unwin (1999). A comprehensive examination of the concept and

Unwin's (1999) counter-arguments are contained in appendix 2. It is sufficient to note here that it has been propounded as one potential quantitative method of evaluating wine quality, but that there may be weaknesses with the concept.

## **5 Cues: The correlates of wine quality**

The issue of cues has already been addressed in detail. However, there are some aspects of cues that are specific to wine as a product and on which the wine industry has commented. These are considered in more detail below.

### **5.1 Intrinsic cues: the importance of appearance**

It has long been established that the appearance<sup>8</sup> of a wine can have an impact on a taster's evaluation of its aroma (Williams, Langron, & Noble, 1984) and its taste (Pangborn, Berg, & Hansen, 1963), although it seems that when instructed to do so, trained assessors can block off visual influences (Williams et al., 1984). Some experts have argued that density of colour is important to red wine quality (Somers & Evans, 1974), but this assertion is controversial, at least with varieties such as pinot noir where deep colour can suggest an over-extracted wine. (Brook, 2002; Hanson, 1995). Brochet (2001) has also shown that colour influences quality evaluation not just directly, but also indirectly by acting as an index for the categorisation of our language about wine which in turn shapes how we evaluate a wine (Solomon, 1997).

It has been suggested that consumers have regarded the depth of colour of a wine as important as a quality cue for many hundreds of years (Phillips, 2000). There is some evidence – at least if popular wine writers reflect their public - that this is still true (Gaiter & Brecher, 2000; Hoggart, 2002). However, other research in Sweden from an economic perspective has also questioned the relevance of hue and depth of colour to the consumer (Nerlove, 1995), and some work suggests that flavour has more importance in determining acceptability (Williams et al., 1984).

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<sup>8</sup> Appearance can relate to a number of factors. It comprises the hue of the wine, the depth of colour and the contrast of colour at the rim with that at the centre (core) of the wine. Additionally factors such as haze or the appearance of bubbles may be relevant as quality cues.

That, however, does not preclude appearance (in the glass) from acting as a preliminary cue to quality.

## **5.2 Extrinsic cues**

Extrinsic cues have already been examined in some detail. However, two have specific relevance to wine, and need further consideration here.

### **5.2.1 Closures**

There is currently substantial debate within the wine industry about wine bottle closures and the potential replacement of corks by other products. Without entering that debate it is worth noting that the form of closure may act as an extrinsic cue to quality. Some commercial research indicates that consumers may prefer corks to synthetic closures (Anon, 2002b), although this must be treated with caution as the study was commissioned by the cork industry and other evidence, particularly wine sales, suggests that this is not a major issue for the average wine drinker (Robinson, 2002).

### **5.2.2 Terroir**

There is an argument about whether *terroir*<sup>9</sup> is an extrinsic cue (i.e. that the grapes' geographic origin, as a physical place, prompts the consumer to purchase a wine) or an intrinsic cue (because site gives specific and non-replicable flavour characteristics to the wine). However, the latter, to the extent that it occurs, is probably only relevant as a cue to a minority of consumers (although it may be more important for professionals), so the issue is typically dealt with as an extrinsic rather than an intrinsic factor. Certainly *terroir* has been perceived to be an element of quality, at least in France, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Peynaud, 1987). It has been noted that the Champagne region, for instance, offers a 'sustainable competitive

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<sup>9</sup> A French term which is difficult to translate precisely. Generally it refers to the concept that grapes are a product of their specific topographic, climatic and soil-related environment. By extension it may be used to imply that the taste of some wines uniquely reflects the specific vineyard in which the grapes were grown.

advantage', deriving from its location, which allows it to distinguish itself from its rivals in quality terms (Sharp & Smith, 1991).

Wine, it can be argued, may have to conform to 'regional standards', that is it may have to show a typicality of origin to be considered a quality wine (Jackson, 1994). At its most extreme this means that a wine will display a unique character, related to the vineyard's specific local environment, and its quality will lie, at least in part, in that uniqueness (Halliday & Johnson, 1992; Vandour, 2002). This approach is much more favoured in Europe, and to a certain extent in the USA, than in Australia (Matthews, 2002). However, for some critics the notion of terroir giving quality depends less on viticultural impact and more on historic reputation (Somers, 1998) or marketing (Vandour, 2002). Even those who might naturally take a more European approach, such as the French Master of Wine Gerard Basset, note that a wine is not superior just because it conforms to type. Rather it must show additional organoleptic facets of quality – so that it tastes good (Basset, 2000).

### **5.3 Production methods**

Whilst the experience of wine lies in the tasting rather than in how it is made, there is a logical relationship between tasting and production. At the very least poor production methods may destroy a wine's quality and careful fermentation and handling may improve that which would otherwise be pedestrian.

Historically the role of the winemaker was considered to be that of quality control (Rankine, 1989). This was often perceived to be guaranteeing the minimisation of faults in a wine. Guaranteed quality, however, has now been replaced by the concept of acquired quality. This takes the perspective that quality is not merely the natural characteristics of the wine, 'since it is precisely human intervention which has created and highlighted these so-called natural characteristics!' (Peynaud, 1987 p. 222). Instead of merely maintaining the excellence of what exists, it may be possible to improve on it. At its very least, this may merely depend on the use of classic, higher quality, grape varieties (Geene et al., 1999). However, technology is increasingly important in wine production. Modern techniques – such as micro-oxygenation (which may 'improve' flavour and texture) and must adjustment by reverse osmosis or vacuum distillation – can treat

shortcomings from the weather, a poor vineyard site, or even mistakes of the winemaker (Wright, 2001). The argument that a wine has to be fit for its purpose has already been considered and that 'fitness' relies directly on controlling its style (Beckett & Atkin, 2002), which depends on production methods. Furthermore it can be noted that there are specific wines, for instance, expensive sparkling wines, which rely substantially on their production method for their perceived quality (Sharp & Smith, 1991).

## **6 Wine quality and the role of marketing**

Some in the wine industry have a perspective, or partial perspective, that wine quality relates not only to what is drunk, but also to how it is marketed. Thus, what matters 'for consumers [is] not absolute quality, but perceived quality. Perceived quality is the gleam of a brand, an abstraction' (Atkinson, 1999 p. 232). Because of wine's symbolic relevance Atkinson linked perceived quality to the image that marketing imparts to a brand. Research recently undertaken by the *Consorzio* (formal association) of producers of Asti Spumante in Italy has noted that whilst consumers enjoy the style of wine which they make, the product's image does not match up to their appreciation of its taste (Regazzoni, 2001).

Additionally there is the fraught understanding between professionals, including marketers, and consumers. Problems of communication have already been noted (Stavro, 2001), but as suggested they may be conceptual as much as linguistic. Also previously noted has been the distinction made between 'real quality' (based on the grapes) and the consumer's perceived quality, based on image, reputation and other marketing related factors (Penn, 2001). There may be a failure of communication if professionals address the former whilst consumers expect the latter. A major issue for the wine industry could be to separate quality from consumer preference.

Another marketing perspective suggests that wine consumers are shifting away from low quality towards high quality wine (however defined) (Geene et al., 1999). The declining sale of bulk wine and the increased consumption of bottled and, in Europe, QWPSR wines tends to support this (Berger, Anderson, & Stringer, 1998; Spahni, 1995). Ultimately, however, mere quality may not be enough to sell a

wine, at least in the contemporary world where technical reliability is a *sine qua non*. Whilst some in the industry still argue that quality is the secret to success (Anon, 2002a), the comment has been made by a marketing academic that ‘wine which is technically superior is no longer enough; it is now merely an entry ticket to the ball. You have to learn how to dance too’ (Lockshin, 1999 p. 65). Quality, in Lockshin’s terms, is not enough on its own to market wine – it is merely a precondition of successful marketing. Successful marketing depends on many more factors besides quality.

## **7 Conclusion**

The wine industry shares the uncertainty about quality displayed by marketing researchers and other social scientists. This uncertainty is accentuated by factors which relate specifically to wine as a product. There is, for instance, an apparent indecision about how the assessment of wine quality is carried out. Is it a scientific process, performed by the chemical analysis of the product? Is it an organoleptic procedure which requires tasting? Does it relate to other, external means of benchmarking quality, such as price-related classifications or geographic origin? In practice, many consumers appear to utilise cues (Chaney, 2000; Lockshin & Rhodus, 1993; Tustin & Lockshin, 2001) which in the case of appearance, origin and production methods may operate in a distinctive manner for wine.

More generally one can note that there may be distinct issues to be addressed on the subject of quality generally and wine quality in particular. It is possible to distinguish the issue of how drinkers conceptualise wine quality (for instance, is it subjective or objective?) from what they may consider the component features or characteristics of wine quality to be. Related to these two questions is the topic of what motivates consumers to drink wine, and what procedures they use to evaluate quality. Drinkers’ core motivations may affect what they look for to exemplify the quality of the product, and the processes which they use to assess that quality may also colour their concept of the quality itself. These conundrums become harder to unravel when one notes that wine consumption is an aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic process and thus less susceptible to precise, quantifiable analysis.



The findings of this study will address these issues. The next chapter will outline the process used to obtain the data.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **PROCESS**

#### **1 Introduction**

The study was planned to examine the understanding of wine quality amongst three reference groups - producers, mediators and consumers. Consequently comparison between the target groups formed a key element of the analysis.

The precise nature of perceptions of wine quality did not appear to have been investigated previously, at least in this detail. Therefore the study was exploratory, seeking primarily to interpret consumers' perceptions rather than test existing theoretical frameworks. Thus qualitative methods were considered appropriate (Calder, 1977; Morgan, 1988; Rook, 1988). The human processes being studied included the cognitive, the sensory and the affective, so that it was necessary to establish a methodology which allowed these elements of the personal response to wine to be explored (Douglas, 1985; Patton, 1989). Individual interviews and focus groups were adopted to achieve this. In addition wine was used as a stimulus in focus groups to facilitate observation and exploration of the sensory element of engagement with the product.

#### **2 Design**

The research used two methods: focus groups (which included wine tasting) and individual interviews. These processes were adopted as they were considered the qualitative research methods most suited to a topic (quality evaluation in a product with a substantial aesthetic dimension) which involved a substantial cognitive component, but which also allowed for more unconscious and affective perspectives to be observed and teased out.

## **2.1 Focus groups.**

Within the perspective of qualitative research focus groups have traditionally been seen as a preliminary exploratory tool, essentially a form of quick ‘mass interview’ (Morgan, 1988 p. 9). However, they do have another function. The interchange of ideas with a number of other participants may allow for the more explicit articulation and development of ideas which are otherwise imperfectly thought out (Bristol & Fern, 1996; Morgan, 1988). Morgan (1988) develops this theme, pointing out that a group may begin with common vagueness about a topic and uncertainty about whether or not any common understanding about it can be attained. However, as they start to share different perspectives the group members can isolate areas both of agreement and disagreement, effectively allowing the researcher an insight into opinion formation, thus making the groups interactive (Morgan, 1988 p. 27f.). This essentially creates a dynamic, dialectical approach. This study primarily concentrated on feelings and opinions and their application to consumer and marketing decision making. Thus a process involving dynamic focus groups was considered to be a useful core part of the research process, rather than merely an initial exploratory stage, as it allowed for the articulation and evolution of partially formed ideas.

Given the subject matter of the research the focus groups (of which there were ten in total) included a short wine tasting – thus making them ‘focus tastings’ rather than just focus groups. An extensive search of the literature available in the public domain suggested no documented research on the use of wine as a facilitation tool within focus groups. Beer has been used as a stimulus (Ackoff & Emshoff, 1975; Jacoby et al., 1971) and undoubtedly large wine companies have used focus groups to explore aspects of attitudes to wine, but that research tends to remain ‘commercial and in confidence’.

The use of wine as a stimulus in focus groups served three purposes.

1. The wines selected stimulated the participants’ exploration of their ideas about wine quality, helping the evolution and refinement of their views about and approaches to wine.

2. It allowed the participants to concentrate on the process of aesthetic evaluation in isolation from the normal concentration on extrinsic cues, such as packaging or price. The tastings thus allowed an examination of how drinkers engage with and evaluate wine *per se*. This provided an opportunity to explore perceived aesthetic quality and the mechanisms involved in evaluating that quality.
3. At a basic level the process of tasting put participants more rapidly at ease and rewarded them for their participation.

For ease of data recording and analysis, as well as to offer a form of triangulation the focus groups were recorded on both audio and videotape. The latter is particularly relevant, as it is well established within qualitative research that data can be gleaned not merely from words, but from facial expression and body language (Morgan, 1988; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Each session lasted between 80 and 120 minutes.

There was an ethical dimension to the data collection which required consideration, revolving around the provision of alcohol to informants. The consumption of alcohol does come with some risks. In order to minimise these risks informants were advised of the following:

- They would be tasting, not drinking, which means small samples were to be poured. The total amount they tasted was less than two standard units of alcohol. This kept the amount that they drank below the recommended daily intake suggested by the National Health and Medical Research Council. It also kept their blood alcohol level below 0.05 g/100 mL (the legal maximum blood alcohol level for driving in the three states where the data collection was carried out).
- They were offered a taxi fare home, so they could opt not to drive.
- If they did not want the taxi fare home they were advised to wait for 30 minutes after the end of the focus group before driving.

Ethics approval from the Edith Cowan University was also obtained, which addressed this element of the data collection.

## **2.2 Individual and small group interviews.**

Interviews are a standard tool in qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Mackay, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Their use in this study was to allow the detailed exploration of the views of specific respondents which was precluded by the time constraints and lack of intimacy involved in focus groups (Fontana and Frey, 1994). Interviews may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. According to Fontana and Frey (p. 364), structured interviewing may help minimise errors but often ‘overlooks or inadequately assesses the emotional dimension’, and this is supported generally by other qualitative researchers (e.g., Mackay, 1997). For this reason, and given that part of the subject matter of this study was affective processes, it was felt that a formalised interview process would not reveal participant attitudes fully. On the other hand the cognitive dimension of the subject matter required some focus to ensure full consideration of key themes. Consequently a limited level of directive focus was planned, resulting in the use of a series of semi-structured interviews.

As with focus groups, there is a limit to the number of effective interviews before respondents offer the researcher nothing in the way of new data. Douglas (1985) suggests one should only continue with a sample until one stops getting new results. It is impossible to predict exactly how many interviews will be necessary to reach this position. However, it was estimated before data collection that a minimum of 40 would be needed, with most of those being with consumers, rather than the professionals, who were considered elite informants (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). In the event 43 people were interviewed.

## **2.3 Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of research is based on two factors (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The first is the nature of the data collected. In an attempt to attain data trustworthiness in qualitative research the standard process is to submit the data and the data collection process to triangulation - the use of multiple practices to validate the research (Denzin, 1989; Janesick, 1994). Two forms of triangulation were employed in this study:

- Data triangulation. Data collection occurred in three states across Australia. Different reference groups were used (consumers, producers and mediators) to maximise the informant perspective. In addition the consumer informants were explicitly sourced to reflect three levels of consumption practice.
- Methodological triangulation. Two methods (focus groups and interviews) were adopted to obtain the data necessary for the study (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

The second factor necessary to attain trustworthiness is the role of the researchers themselves (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). It is essential that, as far as possible, they approach the research and analysis as free from biases as possible (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Thus, the cross-checking with the research supervisors of (1) data analysis, (2) interpretation and (3) tentative conclusions offered a further means of adding rigour to the study.

### **3 Sample**

Full demographic details of the sample for all three reference groups are given in appendix 3. The following discussion outlines the principles and process behind informant selection.

#### **3.1 Wine producers**

The reference group of ‘wine producers’ included wine makers and viticulturists. The former undertake the key tasks in the production process where an ability to analyse ‘quality’ in wine may be integral to the shaping of the final product. There is a viticultural debate about whether or not the style and quality of wine originates in the vineyard or is more substantially fashioned in the winery. Thus it seemed pertinent to include some viticulturists in this group. Consequently one individual interview and one focus group participant were solely viticulturists (although other producers did have viticultural as well as wine production responsibilities, as is common in the wine industry).

Wineries represented were selected to reflect the range of wines produced in Australia. Although there are now over 1625 wineries in Australia (Anon, 2003a), almost two-thirds of all wine in the country is made by the four largest companies,

and 95% is made by the twenty largest (Anon, 2003a). As a result of this industry concentration it was decided to focus on wine makers from a spread of backgrounds but with a majority of informants sourced from the large and medium sized wineries.

Informants were selected to aim for some gender and age balance, although the preponderance of males in the production side of the industry means that there was not an exact gender balance. The producer sample also included a student of wine science, not employed in the wine industry at the time other than as a cellar hand at different wineries at vintage time. Additionally one informant was an independent contract grape grower who provided fruit for wine producers without being involved in the production process. This person was selected as contract grape growing is a major though often overlooked role in wine production in Australia, and it was thought that this distinct perspective would add depth to the data.

The final sample comprised 22 informants involved in production. Two of those were involved in grape growing (the second employed as a viticulturist by a winery), one was a student and 19 were winemakers. The winemakers included seven working for one or other of the big four companies, five from medium-sized producers, and five from small and boutique wineries. Two of the latter were also involved in providing contract winemaking services<sup>1</sup>, another important but often overlooked aspect of the wine production industry.

### **3.2 Mediators**

The second reference group, the mediators, included marketing managers, commercial wine buyers, retailers, wholesalers, sommeliers, wine writers, judges and critics. Again respondents were selected to attempt a broad balance of gender and age. The final sample comprised four retailers, eight wholesalers and/or importers, three marketing managers, two sommeliers, three wine journalists, a show judge and an educator, making a total of 23 informants.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, they made wine on behalf of other producers or for other brands than their own.

### **3.3 Consumers**

The reference group designated the ‘consumers’ was constructed to mirror the range of general consumers of wine; that is, it was intended to be broadly gender balanced, with a range of ages and occupations. Critically this group reflected an array of levels of involvement with wine and wine consumption. Potential informants were therefore asked to self-assess the average amount which they spend per bottle of wine, and depending on their response were separated into one of three categories. These categories comprised:

- Ultra-premium wine drinkers (UCs) (who spend on average more than \$15 per bottle).
- Super-premium wine drinkers (SCs) (spending on average \$10-15 per bottle).
- Premium and basic wine drinkers (BCs) (averaging less than \$10 per bottle, or being regular cask wine drinkers).

This split of informants was also created to avoid focus groups becoming dominated by those with a wider range of wine experience at the expense of the views and ideas of those who spend less on wine (and are therefore likely to have less involvement with the product). These groupings of consumers (including their nomenclature) accord precisely with the price segments adopted by the Australian wine industry as detailed in its consultancy report commissioned from Rabobank International (Geene et al., 1999). However, it is necessary to point out that there was not always an invariable match of consumer to category. One BC, for instance, who drank cask wine on an almost daily basis, would occasionally spend up to \$30 on a bottled wine.

### **3.4 Sourcing informants**

To provide a ready source of participants and ensure a degree of balance in a sparsely populated but geographically diverse country, data collection was carried out across a number of locations. The following comments set the context for the geographical location of informants:

- South Australia is responsible for producing more than half of the country’s wine (Osmond & Anderson, 1998). A substantial proportion (40%) of the informants



were sourced from this state. The balance was drawn from other wine producing states. This focus was probably not critical, as almost all Australia's winemakers and many of the country's viticulturists train either at the University of Adelaide or at Charles Sturt University, and geographic provenance alone is unlikely to have an impact on an informant's perspective of wine quality. Nevertheless, the geographic spread did preclude any skewing of the data in the event that localised 'regional perspectives' did exist.

- Whilst marketing, retail and other intermediary activities operate across the country, the impact of population density means that the most complex distribution systems and the widest array of wines are to be found in Sydney and Melbourne. These cities are also home to the most influential writers and critics. Fifty percent of informants in the mediator reference group were therefore located in Sydney. The balance was drawn from other regions.
- Consumption patterns are broadly similar across the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Informants from the consumer reference group could thus be widely sourced. However, as the most concentrated markets are in the cities of the eastern states, one half of informants were located from one of those markets – Sydney. The balance was drawn from the smaller states of South Australia and Western Australia.

Informants were sourced in a number of ways:

- Personal contacts in the wine industry were used to set up balanced focus groups and to locate a range of interviewees from producers and mediators within the researcher's home state. In other locations some of the researcher's contacts (including a winemaker and two wine educators) were utilised to establish focus groups and locate informants – effectively the use of a 'marriage broker' (Douglas, 1985 p. 63). These contacts were given a brief which detailed the type of informants desired (e.g. current employment, company background, age, gender etc.), as well as the information that potential informants should be given in advance of any direct contact with the researcher.
- Within the researcher's home state informants for the consumer group were located by circulating fliers in a number of locations. The fliers requested

assistance in carrying out the research. As well as explaining the broad thrust of the research and the processes to be adopted (focus groups and interviews), the fliers invited potential informants to give some basic demographic information to ensure effective and balanced construction of the focus groups.

- To locate potential consumers away from the researcher's home state (i.e. in Sydney and Adelaide) two of the researcher's contacts (both wine educators) were again used – the marriage brokers. They had a promotional flier as detailed above to facilitate the construction of focus groups.

Sample size varied from group to group. Whilst equal weight has been given throughout the research to the views and feelings of each reference group, it is clear that the population size of each group varies substantially, with consumers being a much larger percentage of the overall population than either of the other two groups. Additionally it was envisaged that as 'elite groups' (Marshall & Rossman, 1989 p. 94), both wine producers and the mediators would have more well-formed ideas and feelings about the topic, possibly showing more commonality and certainly ensuring that the issues would be easier to explore. For these reasons it was determined from the start that more time would be spent on data collection from consumers in order to allow for a comprehensive exploration of their perspectives.

### 3.5 Terminology

To distinguish sources of data the following terms are used:

- ***Interviewees***: respondents who were involved in an individual or small group (maximum three individuals) interview.
- ***Participants***: respondents who took part in a focus group, which included wine tasting in the process.
- ***Informants***: individual interviewees and focus group participants collectively.

## **4 Procedure**

In neither the focus groups nor the interviews were informants advised in advance of the precise subject matter of the research, although they did know it would be generally about wine. This was designed for two reasons: first, to avoid pre-prepared ‘scripts’, in which informants offered an authoritative text (which could have been a problem with the professional informants and some of the more experienced consumers). Second, the issue of quality was only raised in both interviews and focus groups as the third topic for discussion - normally five to ten minutes into the process. This was to see if informants raised it themselves (thus allowing the researcher to gauge whether or not it had a high level of importance for them). Advance notice of the subject matter for discussion would have prejudiced the possibility of this spontaneous response from informants. Some informants later suggested that if they had been given advance notice of the questions they could have offered more informed and cogent answers, but it was strongly felt that immediate and unrehearsed answers would offer a more honest and incisive exposition of what the informant actually felt.

### **4.1 Focus groups**

#### ***4.1.1 Structuring the focus groups***

It is generally suggested that focus groups should be repeated until the researcher can anticipate what participants will say, which is normally three to four groups (Calder, 1977). However, given that this study examined three separate reference groups, and also in the light of what has been said about elite informants (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), it was decided to conduct a total of 10 focus groups. Two focus groups were planned for each of the producer and mediator focus groups. As the reference group of the consumers covered both a larger population size and a group with potentially less coherent ideas and feelings, six consumer focus groups were organised, two directed at each of the consumer categories (BC, SC and UC).

Participants at each focus group were provided with the same four wines to taste. The bottles were disguised to avoid participants making any judgment about

the wine based on extrinsic cues. (See appendix 4 for details about the wines and the rationale for their selection). The participants were initially invited to discuss their views on quality and asked to consider the relationship of quality to price and to value. In addition they were asked to consider what quality actually is. They were then presented with the wines and asked to comment generally on their response to them and particularly on their perceptions of the wines' quality in the light of the previous conversation. Following the wine tasting, the participants were asked more explicitly about the evaluative mechanisms they use (if any) in establishing quality, and to consider the aesthetic component of wine quality evaluation.

In order to fine tune the process and in particular to ensure that the discussion topics were sufficiently focused and well defined, a pilot focus group was held with some of the researcher's existing students of wine. Data from this group have been excluded from the data analysis for this study but ideas resulting from the group's dialogue were introduced as topics for discussion both in subsequent focus groups and in the individual interviews. As a result of the pilot focus group the interview guide for each of the target groups was modified. It subsequently introduced topics covering participants' motivation for drinking, their hedonic responses to the wines tasted and the importance or otherwise of novelty/distinctiveness (in aesthetic terms) in wine as an aspect of their quality evaluation processes. Further, the topic covering the aesthetic evaluation of wine was reformulated to make it more readily comprehensible to participants who may be unfamiliar with the concept of aesthetic appreciation. As a sub-topic participants were also invited to describe any differences in the quality evaluations they make between the "clinical" environment of the focus groups and when drinking in other environments. A guide to the topics raised in the focus groups is provided in appendix 5.

#### ***4.1.2 Focus group participants***

Numbers taking part in the focus groups varied between four and seven, with an average of six in each. There were a total of 62 participants over 10 focus groups.

It is worth noting that different methods were used to locate focus group participants. As a result, some focus groups included participants who all knew each other well (and in one case worked for the same organisation). In other groups only

some of the participants knew each other. There were also a number of focus groups where participants had little if any association. Inevitably where the participants were well known to each other the group settled into an easy rapport quickly. This facilitated the flow of the group, but there may have been underlying dynamics unobservable to the researcher which modified the trustworthiness of data.

#### ***4.1.3 The operation of the focus groups***

In practice most of the focus groups appeared to work successfully. Generally participants rapidly became at ease with the process (perhaps assisted by the subject matter and the prospect of a drink). As a result little direction from the researcher was required, other than to encourage the less forthcoming participants. In one BC focus group there appeared to be a participant who seemed to be easily influenced by the other members of the group, but such overt passivity seemed the exception rather than the rule.

The impact of personal taste on the evaluation of wine and the common use of wine as a marker of status meant that the danger of group dominance by one or two individuals was potentially a major problem. In some of the focus groups (noticeably the SC and UC tastings in New South Wales) this was apparent, requiring action to involve some of the less forthcoming participants. In recognition of the possibility of dominance and ‘group speak’, the focus groups were video-recorded, allowing re-analysis of the group dynamics in an attempt to observe where it had an impact on participant responses. Additionally, as the discussion progressed the researcher attempted to draw out less confident members of the group. However, too much should not be made of the issue of individual dominance. At all tastings different participants selected a range of wines as their preference. This selection ranged from two different wines at some of the professional focus groups to all four at one of the consumer groups. In any event dominance seemed less of an issue in the professional focus groups where the individuals’ confidence in their own knowledge and experience allowed them to disagree more readily with their colleagues.

The success of the focus groups in offering an interactive development of ideas was tested on some occasions. At the conclusion of some of the groups

participants were asked if the process had aided the clarification or evolution of their own views. Whilst it was not generally the participants' view that their ideas had been modified, the general response from both professional and non-professional participants was that the process had tended to clarify and fine tune their ideas on the subject of wine quality.

## **4.2 Individual and small group interviews**

Eight initial interviews were carried out with producers and nine with mediators (one of these a paired interview, with two co-workers at the same restaurant). Within the reference group of the consumers eight interviews were carried out with each of the sub-groups of SCs and UCs. There were seven BC interviews, one of which was a multiple interview with three interviewees (necessary because of time constraints amongst the interviewees, who knew each other). This made nine BC interviewees in total. There were thus ultimately 40 individual interviews with 43 informants.

Interviewees were invited to comment on a number of issues. These covered perceptions on the nature of wine quality, including whether informants perceived quality to be absolute/objective or relative/subjective. The interview also covered what factors they use to interpret quality and, if they use cues, what they are and the contexts within which they use them. The interviewees were also probed about their views on the relationship of quality to value and price. Finally they were asked about how they assess wine organoleptically and how effectively they consider the results of organoleptic assessment are communicated by others. Generally the time available with a single person meant that a wider range of topics was covered in the individual interviews than in the focus groups.

Whilst the topics discussed above remained fundamental to all interviews in the study, supplementary questions – designed to extrapolate specific ideas – were not absolutely identical for each reference group. For instance, mediators were invited to comment on how their views of quality informed their role as the marketers or promoters of wine. Producers were asked to comment on the relative importance of vineyard versus winemaker in producing wine quality (the question is one of current debate amongst both wine professionals and amateurs). Consumers

were asked about factors informing the purchase of wine. The interview guides for individual interviews are contained in appendix 5.

## **5 Analysis**

The research study was planned as an interpretive project, seeking understanding of how drinkers conceptualise wine quality and the nature of their engagement with the quality of the product. It was not intended to be quantitative, although in the event one finding from the study did occur in a partially quantitative form (discussed in chapter 8 section 2.3).

### **5.1 Process**

All focus groups and interviews were recorded on audiotape and the focus groups were also video recorded. In addition short field notes were kept of each interaction. The recordings and the field notes were transcribed into MSWord.

A formalised process was adopted to code the focus groups. Having prepared a draft final transcript from the audiotape, that draft was then compared and corrected against the videotape. A revised transcript was prepared, and the videotape was watched a second time, at which stage non-verbal interactions and responses were noted on the transcript.

A similar, standardised process was utilised to code the individual interviews. A draft final transcript was prepared from the audiotape. The draft was then checked by the researcher against the audiotape and his field notes and corrected where necessary. The transcript was thus finalised. This was all done as a single process with the coding of the document to ensure that the latter took place with maximum recall of the interview dialogue.

From the point where data collection began a process of analysis and cross-comparison of responses was employed, not merely to commence the analytic process by developing categories for the data (Janesick, 1994), but also to refine future data collection as it occurred. Thus emerging themes were able to permeate subsequent data collection, both in an attempt to add plausibility to concepts as they arose (Huberman & Miles, 1994) and to identify possible ‘negative instances’

(Douglas, 1985 p. 49f.). Where relevant new ideas were introduced as supplementary questions to informants.

The process of refining the data used NUD•IST (Richards & Richards, 1994) to facilitate categorisation. This refinement process broke down the responses of each reference group separately, and also established correspondences or dissonances between their responses.

A number of NUD•IST nodes were constructed before finalisation of the data. These codes were based both on categories which had been established by the literature review and those which seemed to have emerged during the course of the data collection. These included twelve free nodes, 23 'tree' nodes relating to informant demographics, and many other nodes allocated to four overall categories ('why drink wine?', 'the nature of quality', 'assessing quality' and 'relevance of quality'). Analysis therefore commenced with 170 nodes available for categorising informants and informant views. As analysis continued further codes were created. By completion of the analysis 343 nodes had been created, including 50 relating to demographic information. Additionally an overall category relating to 'wine and aesthetics' had been established out of some of the free nodes.

The emerging themes which first arose during data collection were developed during the process of data coding, so at the point where detailed analysis began a series of concepts, hypotheses and ideas for evaluation and cross-comparison were already assembled. These were recorded for subsequent exploration and testing.

Throughout analysis the data were assessed for credibility, transferability, dependability (both of content and of informant), confirmability (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) and integrity (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). This was done by considering the responses of each informant against those of their reference group, assessing consistency of responses between locations, analysing trustworthiness of responses both by content and behaviour, and reviewing body language and non-verbal signals. On a few occasions this resulted in informant responses being treated with caution. Specifically with the data from one BC informant corroborating perspectives from similar informants were sought before any credibility was given to his statements.



## 5.2 Involvement

During the process of analysing the data it quickly became clear that splitting the various consumer reference groups into UC, SC and BC, depending merely on the average price paid per bottle of wine, was a limited means of categorisation. For instance, one UC appeared to discuss wine less like other UCs and more like some of the SCs – specifically showing less evaluative complexity and brand differentiation than other UCs. Nevertheless, she spent quite a high amount on average per bottle, so was classified as an UC. Equally, one BC in particular demonstrated significant knowledge about the product and a willingness to participate in complex wine tasting exercises. He was a mature student – and it is possible that he was categorised as a BC because, at that stage in life, he could spend little on wine, even though he may have spent more had he had a higher disposable income.

It therefore seemed that price was merely one means of classifying consumers, and involvement with the product could be another useful mechanism both for assessing consumers' approaches to wine and for analysing data. When involvement studies are carried out it is normal to get consumers to self-assess their involvement level, usually by rating aspects such as their interest in a product and its importance to them (Olshavsky, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985). In this case, as involvement only arose as a major issue towards the end of data collection, it was not possible to get informants to self-assess. Given the richness of the data available, it was possible and necessary to estimate the informants' involvement level rather than rely on their subjective views on how involved they might be.

As coding continued, each informant (including all focus group participants) was coded to an involvement<sup>2</sup> level. Judgments were made about each informant based on the ancillary detail which they gave about how they consumed wine. Were they information seeking (for instance, did they go on wine education courses), or had they been wine tourists (thus looking for other experiences associated with wine)? Both of these would tend to point to a high involvement level. Alternatively, did they invariably try to buy wine at a low price, or did they display inaccurate

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, unless otherwise explicitly stated, the term involvement refers throughout to PCI (enduring involvement) rather than situational, brand or purchase decision involvement.

knowledge (factors which could suggest a lower level of involvement)? It is relevant to note that the amount they were prepared to spend on wine, and thus the reference group, was one pointer amongst many to their ultimate level of involvement, as indeed were other factors – specifically the frequency of their wine consumption. On this basis it transpired that all the BCs except three were low involvement (the exceptions were medium-involvement). Eight of the SCs were classified as low-involvement and thirteen as medium-involvement. Nine UCs were considered medium-involvement and eleven high-involvement.

Inevitably no drinker gave purely high- or low-involvement indicators. Each had a mix of suggestive factors. Nevertheless, it was possible to make a decision on balance from a number of indicators. As a result of this all informants were categorised on scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high). Level 6 was reserved for those working in the wine industry, who were, with two exceptions, assumed to have the maximum involvement possible<sup>3</sup>. Consumers were coded to one of five levels of involvement, a process which accords with the policy adopted by other researchers of wine consumption (d'Hauteville, 2003). Level 5 includes all those who would be considered, in common speech, connoisseurs. Level 1 comprised those with the most minimal interest in, knowledge of and concern for the product. An assumption was made that there could be a level 0 (for those seeking the alcohol in the product with no associated aesthetic or social experience whatsoever), but none of the informants in this study fell into that category. The result of the classification by involvement level is set out in table 5.1.

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<sup>3</sup> Of those two one was still coded as high-involvement, the other, a farmer who was also a contract grape-grower, was coded to low-involvement.

**Table 5.1 – Informants categorised by involvement level**

Involvement Level	Involvement category	Number of Informants
<b>Low</b>	1	8
	2	17
<b>Medium</b>	3	15
	4	10
<b>High</b>	5	12
	6 (all professional)	42

The importance of the six levels of involvement is that they allowed a fairly detailed differentiation of respondents across a range of levels of involvement, as well as for a simpler low (levels 1 and 2), medium (levels 3 and 4) or high (levels 5 and 6) classification. If necessary it could also have been reduced to a simple low or high divide - which has been claimed as the only relevant split of involvement by certain researchers (e.g., Rossiter et al., 1991). Unless otherwise stated in the subsequent chapters drinkers are categorised as low-involvement (levels 1 and 2) medium-involvement (levels 3 and 4) and high involvement (level 5 and professionals).

Having established these criteria for categorising informants, the data they offered could therefore be analysed by categorising the informants both in terms of the price they would be prepared to pay for their wine or their overall level of involvement with the product. It must be stressed that involvement was not an issue in data collection, but in data analysis.

## **6 Methodological limitations**

The researcher was known to have wine expertise. This could have intimidated some informants, and persuaded others to avoid ‘stating the obvious’ on the basis that the researcher would know ‘the obvious’ anyway and thus it could remain unsaid. There may therefore have been information unspoken which might have altered the overall interpretation. On the occasions when the researcher had some knowledge of the informants (which happened with a number of the professionals) there was no sense that this was happening. Rather the researcher’s perspective was that information given formally by elite informants accorded with views and attitudes they otherwise held. That may not have been the case with consumer informants, although some went out of their way to point out that their views could be the opposite of those which experts or connoisseurs would hold. At times, however, the danger of this ‘known expertise’ required the researcher to probe carefully if a comment or response appeared too glib or simple.

Additionally it is necessary to note that there was only a single data collector/researcher. Although the study supervisors maintained a close interest in the process and regularly provided comments, there was no formal researcher triangulation which may have added to the dependability of interpretation.

As with all qualitative research the general reliability of data was an issue. There is no absolute certainty that reliability can be achieved (Huberman & Miles, 1994). As the findings will show, the views given even by informants from a similar consumption background were often substantially divergent. That in itself was not considered a problem. Interviews and comments were cross-checked against others of a similar reference group and involvement level not to confirm factual correlation, but to ensure a likeness of tone and understanding. Occasionally an informant stood out as being different in approach from others in their group. For instance, one wine maker interviewed seemed to have a very different understanding of what he was doing from other producer informants. With such an informant the information given was treated carefully, but the fact that the tenor and perspective of the informant was unexpected did not discount the data obtained. Additionally, however, it must be noted that all data were self-report data other than observation of participant wine consumption in the focus groups.

A further limitation relates to the overall direction of the research, and specifically the use of masked wines in the focus groups. The research was primarily concerned with the intrinsic evaluation of quality, and, only as a subsidiary issue, with the relationship of intrinsic evaluation to extrinsic factors such as cues. This direction meant, for instance, that the wines which were used as stimuli in the focus groups were masked. In asking participants to give their response to the wines the process concentrated on their evaluation of appearance, aroma, taste and mouthfeel. It did not allow the investigation of brand, image or label as factors in the overall quality evaluation process. The latter investigation was considered beyond the scope of this research, and would have been a major additional undertaking - but inevitably it places a limitation on the findings of the study.

There was one specific methodological concern in regard to the focus groups with professionals. Given that all the wines tasted were masked but revealed to the group at the end of the focus group, some of them may have been fearful of making a 'poor' selection when giving a preference for a specific wine. This could have opened them up to ridicule by their peers. The selection of preferences by professionals certainly was slow and tentative – but this is generally the case with wine tastings anyway. It may be that one or two 'hedged their bets' in making choices, but there was an overall sense that the producer participants were secure enough in their skill and knowledge to be comfortable with the selection that they made.

Further limitations must be noted regarding the sample used. The sample was selected to a large extent from 'friends of friends'. Whilst there is no evidence that this skewed the sample, it could have an impact on the integrity of the data. There was no complete national coverage. The geographic emphasis with producers was on Western Australia and South Australia, and with consumers and mediators the focus was on New South Wales and Western Australia.

## **CHAPTER 6:**

# **CONTEXTUAL FINDINGS: MOTIVATION AND AESTHETIC CONSUMPTION**

The focus of this study is drinkers' perceptions of wine quality. However, as detailed in chapter three, the understanding of how wine quality operates is closely related to drinkers' other perspectives on wine. The most important related issue is their motivation for drinking. Additionally the issue of drinkers' understanding of the aesthetic nature of wine needs to be explored, as this may give some clues about how quality in wine is understood. These issues are addressed in this chapter.

'The findings which directly relate to wine quality are explored later in the light of these contextual issues. Thus in chapter 7 drinkers' conceptualisations of wine quality, and their understanding of its dimensions, are reported. In chapter 8 the various processes used by drinkers to evaluate wine quality are examined. Given the focus of the study, on drinkers' perceptions, the ultimate importance of wine quality (whether to consumers or professionals) is outside the primary scope of the research. However, given the importance of this issue to more practical marketing concerns the relevance of wine quality has been explored and findings relating to it are included in appendix 6.'

### **1 The motivation to drink wine**

There were a number of reasons expressed by wine consumers for drinking wine. The most important, in terms of the number of informants referring to them, were situational reasons (socialising and food) and enjoyment (encompassing a number of different sub-categories). Lubrication and relaxation were also important motivating factors, as was a historical dimension, centred on family tradition and memory. As the literature on motivation is comprehensive it is not worthwhile merely reinforcing what is already well understood. Rather, within the context of

exploring wine quality, this section has two aims. First, to outline how the motivation to drink fits within the triadic experiential-symbolic-utilitarian paradigm of consumption. Second, to highlight areas where the findings suggest aspects of the motivation to drink wine which are at variance with the existing literature or not explored in depth by it.

It is worth noting at an early stage that whilst most aspects of motivation were generally relevant across the full range of informants, including all reference groups and all levels of involvement, the more subtle, or nuanced, elements of motivation were more commonly found, or at least more articulately expressed, amongst the high-involvement drinkers. Some sections of what follows, therefore, inevitably focus on the perceptions of these high involvement drinkers. Whilst this may appear to make the analysis of motivation unbalanced stress is placed on lower-involvement informants where relevant.

## **1.1 Experiential consumption**

### ***1.1.1 Enjoyment***

The single motive given more than any other for the consumption of wine was enjoyment, with most informants citing this amongst their reasons. Enjoyment was crucial across all groups of informants, irrespective of gender, age or level of involvement with the product. It was also consistently the first consumption motive given, suggesting that for many it is the pre-eminent amongst all the motives.

SJC: I'd like to start with something very general. Why does each of you drink wine?

Peta<sup>1</sup> (ME): I enjoy it, for enjoyment, relaxation, pleasure, fun.

Peta's response to the question was instant – showing that enjoyment and its related dimensions was a 'top-of-the-mind' response. This general relevance given to enjoyment was often confirmed by the comments of other informants. Nevertheless, as the quotation suggests, enjoyment is a broad concept which can cover a

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<sup>1</sup> All informants have been given pseudonyms. All professional informants have been coded to high involvement except where indicated.

multiplicity of experiences. These include taste, the effect of alcohol and intellectual challenge.

***Taste:*** Taste was discussed as the key (though not the only) element of enjoyment.

Note the following exchange from a SC focus group:

SJC: Why wine rather than water or beer or...?

Nell (low-involvement): Taste.

Artemis (medium-involvement). Tastes better.

Sue (low-involvement): I like it.

Helena (low-involvement): More flavour.

‘Taste’ as a concept may operate as an overall reason for drinking wine – as in the exchanges above, but it may also involve the process of differentiating specific flavours.

Robert (BC, medium-involvement): I like strong tastes, rich flavours; chocolate, nutmeg flavoured reds.

There appears to be a relationship between the pursuit of ‘taste’ and the quality of a wine. Thus for some informants the ‘better’ the taste, the higher the quality of the wine.

Neville (ME): For me it's taste, it's the only reason I drink it because I like the taste ... A lot of people say if you've got if you've got several bottles of wine ... you drink the best first - because you can't appreciate it after the second one. [I'm] the other way around. I drink increasingly better in quality. And then after I've had that last bottle [if] the next wine I have is not as good I won't drink it, I'll stop there. That's how I drink.

The relationship between taste and quality is a critical one, which will be discussed in more detail later when considering the dimensions of quality.

***Alcohol:*** Informants felt that they understood the impact of alcohol on the body. Generally, informants seemed positive about its effect:

Ursula (BC, low-involvement): I can drink a little bit and feel happy. And I can eat food with it so I know I'm not going to get rolling drunk.



Thus, for those who are positive about the effect of alcohol, there tends to be an element of control or limitation in their use. The need to control consumption may be one reason why informants were positive about wine rather than other drinks. Wine is not as alcoholic as spirits and its consumption with meals does act as a limit on the impact of alcohol.

***Diversity, exploration and challenge:*** The sense of enjoyment which drinkers obtained from flavour and alcohol seemed to be essentially sensory and affective – it was primarily about what they tasted and how they felt. However, for some drinkers there was a matching, and often interrelated, cognitive pleasure. Enjoyment of diversity was linked to pleasure in the new – the exploration of new wines.

Danielle (PR): I drink wine because I absolutely adore wine, I adore it immensely.

SJC: What do you adore about wine?

Danielle (PR): The differences that you get ... Every wine's different, every wine's got its own personality so there's always one that's going to stand out more than the others. And I really like appreciating the subtle differences between wines and understanding – evaluating - them I suppose.

As one would expect, this view was common to professionals, but it was not exclusive to them. Some of the consumers voiced similar ideas, although again it tended to be the most highly involved consumers who were interested in this. Even with BCs, it was those more involved with wine who responded to its diversity, as this extract with a medium-level involvement consumer suggests:

Robert (BC): I've got a nice group of friends and we like talking about it. We talk about it and discuss what can we taste in this, what can we smell in that. Play wine tasters for a couple of hours. Which is the fun - yes definitely a cerebral thing.

As the extract suggests, pleasure in the diversity of flavours available was seen to be linked to exploration of the new.

***Intellectual challenge:*** Some informants explicitly search not just for the diversity of experience but also for intellectual challenge within their drinking

experiences. Inevitably this approach is important for professionals – but is also relevant for some consumers.

SJC: You've done wine classes - do you think knowing a bit more intrudes or increases your appreciation?

Laura (SC, medium-level involvement): Ah, yeah. In the class ... we smelt particular essences after the first three four classes. Raspberry essences and strawberry essence - and to be able to identify those characteristics - the strawberry jam for pinot and that kind of thing. To identify what the wine is. And it's quite a buzz when you can sort of guess it. But also with blends there's ... how shiraz finishes middle [palate] and cabernet finishes front and back and by combining the two you get the full effect across the palate... It's quite amazing to drink wine and then go 'Oh wow well that must be a blend because I've got the full palate finish' ... Definitely. And also knowing varieties and being able to think about where the best ones come from and how they're grown and where they're grown and that kind of thing. It's very good, very good. I'd recommend it to anyone.

Laura is, for a SC, fairly highly involved, and intellectual challenge as a form of enjoyment appeared to be strictly for the more highly involved consumers. Without exception the only consumers who saw wine as being a challenge, and that challenge being pleasurable, were UCs or (in the specific case of Laura above) SCs with an exceptionally raised level of involvement.

Such is the importance of the sense of challenge to a drinker that it may override pure pleasure in the product. The following is an exchange about wine number three, tasted during a ME focus group. Pam is intrigued about the wine – though she concludes that she didn't like it.

SJC: So people are a bit sceptical [about wine no. 3] but one or two think it's interesting.

Pam. It's intrigued me. I'm dying to know whatever it is. It's annoying me because I smelled it before and I'm just thinking ... I don't like it, I was just intrigued.

This response is typical of the way in which a number of the professional and high-involvement consumer focus groups responded to that particular wine; indicating that intrigue and positive affect may be divorced from each other.

### ***1.1.2 Situation***

After the sense of enjoyment, the second key broad category of experiential reasons for drinking wine can be classified as situational. This main category has

two distinct, but inevitably interrelated, sub-categories: social contexts, and the relationship of wine with food.

***Social reasons for drinking:*** At its most basic level wine probably acts in two ways to promote an enjoyable social event. The impact of the alcohol acts to relax people and break down barriers. Additionally the enjoyment resulting from the taste promotes general feelings of well-being and fun. This was a theme common to all reference groups and across all levels of involvement.

Neil (BC, low-involvement): It's affordable and you can derive the pleasure of being sociable with it and it's readily available. It's legal, and it gives a good party atmosphere.

For Neil it was the physiologically related impact which was important – plus the fact that its consumption is licit and inexpensive. Repeatedly friends (rather than, say, business acquaintances) were singled out as the focus for sociable drinking.

There maybe, however, limits to sociability. As a SC focus group discussion revealed the social reasons for drinking and the pursuit of enjoyment may conflict:

Artemis (medium-involvement): There is no way in the world - I can't drink a sweet wine. I mean it wouldn't matter what it is. I find all sweet wines, you know, really hard to take.

Natalya (low-involvement): Like the one [staff member] bought, do you remember that one?

Artemis. Yeah, I would drink it to be sociable. I would drink a glass if it was poured out but that would be it or I would have a few sips.

The members of this focus group all worked together, and each Friday evening would have drink at work to mark the end of the week. Nevertheless sociability on its own was not enough to make some of them drink more than a few sips of an unpleasant wine.

***Wine and food:*** It is necessary at the outset to distinguish two functions of wine as a complement to food. First there is the situational role. Socially and aesthetically (in terms of flavour partnership) wine and food could be seen as a natural pair. In this sense wine consumption has a strong experiential and symbolic function. However, there is also a sense in which wine can be used as a lubricant, to

ease physically the consumption of food. In this sense wine has a significant utilitarian function (discussed further in section 1.3.1 below).

For most informants – including many of those already quoted - the key function of wine is as a situational accompaniment to food. Along with taste this was the most important single reason given for wine consumption. This approach was common to all reference groups and all levels of involvement. Thus:

Dan (BC, low-involvement): I enjoy eating and savouring - eating out. And the wine goes hand in hand with that. There's nothing I enjoy more than having a four hour dinner. That's one of my big things in life and the wine, you know, it goes hand in hand with that.

The marriage of food and wine seems to operate in two ways. One is the overall psychological impact of the food-wine event – in the words of one interviewee, the ambience:

Mary (UC, medium-involvement): I guess it's the ambience of it. I really enjoy having wine with a good meal. It's a pleasurable experience in terms of the overall thing - of having a glass of wine with nice food.

On the other hand, for other informants the link was less obviously about ambient complementarity and more about flavour complementarity – an overtly aesthetic relationship. Peta, in the following extract, suggested that specific taste was clearly important:

Peta (ME): We did some cooking lessons on the weekend. We actually picked four wines ... and then tried each one with the dishes. I think it's kind of interesting to work out which ones totally enhance - and which ones contrasted and they bring out different flavours in the food. And sometimes having a few different wines with meals when you've got a lot people is a great way to do that.

Ultimately there may be a careful marrying of flavours. Naturally this level of specificity tends to operate at the highest levels of involvement. Nevertheless both forms of food-wine complementarity – the ambient and the flavour – appeared to be equally important at all levels of involvement, and to all reference groups.

### **1.1.3 Relaxation**

In terms of the density of informant response, it is likely that relaxation is the third most important reason for wine consumption. This primarily operates as unwinding and may link closely to more symbolic, ritualistic forms of motivation, such as marking the shift from work to relaxation (Gusfield, 1987). Using a glass of wine to unwind was important across the range of informants, including all levels of involvement and consumption regularity and all reference groups. In the following extract Norman has just been asked to explain why he drinks wine:

Norman (BC, low-involvement): I suppose I see it as therapeutic at the end of the day. When I get home I quite often sit down with a glass of wine for a few minutes - and just sort of think about the day. And then probably with tea have another glass of wine and possibly two.

And later in the same interview:

Norman. It's a bit like being a smoker where you tend to get a cigarette out in certain circumstances. And I suppose that's what happens to me, when I get home at night and I've been out all day. And particularly if we've had a busy day or something, you get home and you think, 'this is nice - now [it's] relaxation time.' Glass of wine - that's the first thing, then the taste of course as you start to drink it. So I think it's a part of the overall sort of picture really.

A point worth stressing here is the link of relaxation to the enjoyment of the taste. It may be that the sensory pleasure stimulates the relaxation that unwinding requires. Because someone has the time to allow themselves that pleasure – not permissible when they are busy – they also has time to loosen up. The sensory pleasure itself may also directly induce a feeling of wellbeing, which in turn calms the drinker down. This element of relaxation was often linked explicitly to some of the other reasons already outlined for wine drinking. Norman related relaxation to enjoyment. Others may be conscious of the relaxing impact of alcohol.

Siobhan (UC, medium-involvement): I like the fact that it unwinds me at the end of the day. I do enjoy alcohol of a certain percentage giving me a certain feeling, just -you know - relaxation.

For others there is a direct relationship between relaxation and food:

Artemis (SC, medium-involvement): It's one of the nicer things I think you can do to relax, just have a nice glass of wine and something to eat with it. And I think there's a difference between that and just drinking it, because it makes you feel better.

For Artemis it is not just the drinking, but the drinking in conjunction with food which is important to achieving relaxation.

## **1.2 Symbolic motivation**

### ***1.2.1 The importance of ritual***

Many of the exchanges already outlined as aspects of experiential consumption will already have given a sense of the ritualistic element of wine consumption. This ritualistic dimension, however, is symbolic rather than experiential. It comprises two components. One is providing a sense of marking the more long-term passage of one's life. Wine consumption becomes a method of demarcating important rites of passage. Additionally it can offer a sense of temporal order to one's life – the marker of the escape from work to home, already outlined by some of the informants cited above.

The former concept, that wine marks milestones in life, was exemplified in one focus group discussion:

Mike (UC, medium-involvement). I had - on New Year's Eve 1999 - a really great bottle of champagne. It was about 25 year old vintage Krug which I found amazing. I thought that was just the most amazing wine I've ever had.

In this instance there was a direct link between wine, memory and a significant temporal event. The ritualistic element was also very personal. The specific wine seemed to have had a direct significance for Mike himself but possibly less importance as a marker for others at the event.

Ritualistic drinking can also offer a process for ensuring community cohesion; at the most basic level this can be between husband and wife. In the next extract Florence talks about drinking at home, with her husband:

Florence (BC, low-involvement): Our little social ritual of sitting down with the candle with the wine and good food - we both cook...

Ben. (BC, low-involvement): Would it be fair to draw an analogy between the wine and the candle?

Florence. I'd probably have both but then it doesn't matter what sort of candle's on the table, that's just the setting. The food's presented nicely - sure, that's part of it. But certainly with the wine it's the taste

that's complementing the food, it's not just the fact that it's wine and it's there and it's something to hang onto.

Often this communal cohesion may be about one's relationship with friends. It can also be a ritual to strengthen solidarity at work – rather than just away from work. In the following extract Sue is speaking in a focus group which included a number of SC informants who all worked in the same organisation:

Sue (medium-involvement). For instance, on Friday evening when we sit round and drink at the end of the week, just something sociable, just relax. And when you don't have heaps or anything you just enjoy a social gathering.

### ***1.2.2 A historical perspective***

For many informants asked about why they drink wine, the immediate response was to give a rationale relating to their own personal history. The following comments – from informants with a range of backgrounds - give some idea of the range of perspectives.

Oliver (UC, medium-involvement): Well I've found it great experience; I was born in Adelaide. I lived 20 years there ... and I've spent most of the time [since] living in Europe and America, and now in Sydney. I like the social interaction with wine and experiences you can have, and I do enjoy the taste. And I like the experience you have with food so I think it's got a social interaction and enjoyable accompaniment to food and I think you meet a lot of nice people through it too.

Dan (BC, low-involvement): You'd probably have to say it's tied up being a wine waiter; I've sold liquor for a living.

Umberto (ME): I think wine for me is so much more than just a beverage. You know it's got 7,000 years of history and that's just the most amazing thing. And that all plays and has a role.

Each gives a historical context for his experience, but each of those contexts is subtly different. For Oliver, the historical perspective is broad; it frames the more specific (and more important) social and taste-related reasons for drinking wine. For Dan there was a particular stage in his past which stimulated his interest – when he was working in the hospitality industry. Umberto, the mediator, has a longer term view; drinking wine helps to link him to a much longer tradition and fix his place, especially as one involved in the wine industry, in the flow of history.

***Family tradition:*** For most informants who referred to it, the historical dimension is more focused. A number of informants referred to a family tradition of wine drinking – usually as their first response to the question ‘Why do you drink wine?’

Natalya (SC, low-involvement, migrant from the former Yugoslavia): I remember when we were growing up my father would go around the corner to the shop and the guy was making his own wine. He had barrels so there were no bottles. We drank it in two days.

Charles (UC, high-involvement): I grew up drinking wine, my family drink wine. It was part of every meal and I was encouraged as a teenager to try wine with my father

It was often the case that where family tradition was cited as a key reason for an individual’s wine consumption the informant was born overseas or as the first Australian generation of a migrant family. Additionally the informant was likely to be a frequent consumer – drinking every day, or at least a few days each week.

***Memory and recollection:*** The symbolic significance of wine as a link to the past has been generally overlooked by literature on motivation for wine drinking. It seems likely that there are few, if any, other drinks in the world which, because of their specificity and their potential for differentiation, allow such scope for the particular association with a memory.

Mavis (UC, medium-involvement): [Different flavours bring] different places to me, different people I've met different ... memories. Probably places I've been to, or a party I've been at or whatever.

In a reflection of Proust’s famous madeleine biscuit (Proust, 1973), one informant, commenting on the reasons for his fascination with wine, takes a longer view – fixing what he drinks now in the distant past:

Tom (PR): I've always had a fascination with flavour, I suppose ... smells more than anything else ... I could smell lots of weird things. But yeah I mean as soon as my wife was pregnant I knew from smell .... I always remember being whacked as a kid for stopping to smell things. I used to smell everything ... I think it's a thing we seem to forget a little bit. Smell has a magical link to your youth and places and times and things. It’s almost meditative.



This offers a good mirror of the role of wine and recollection: people (his parents), places and events. To this one can also add the recall of consuming particular wines themselves.

Umberto (ME): I was in Northern Spain in Basque country ... overlooking the - what was it - the Bay of Biscay, looking down over fabulous country. All these pergola vines everywhere. Stinking hot day. Had a little bit of a mild hangover because of being out dancing the night before, drinking a bit of whisky. But anyway we were looking at the wine - came into the winery. Mercifully the winemaker didn't take us into the winery and show us his bottling line or anything. He said 'come upstairs,' had this big oval plate of anchoas, new season anchovies with parsley and oil and bit of vinegar sprinkled over the top of them. He got his Chacoli de Guetaria out, he poured it in the ceremonial way this sharp, green, acidic stuff into this glass and in that moment, in those moments, in that hot, humid, glary climate with this wonderful, tangy sort of anchovy stuff going into your gob and a glass of this wine it was the most perfect wine in the world. And the fact that everyone else was there sharing it and experiencing it made it the most perfect wine and the most perfect situation in the world. It was perfect. Now to plonk that [wine] back in a wine show in Australia you'd probably give it 10 marks out of 20.

Within memory the symbolic importance of a wine may far exceed any intrinsic worth or 'quality' it may attain. This symbolic importance has a certain ambivalent quality. Umberto's job requires him to select 'quality' wines. The event he describes is memorable for the entire experience, and is one of his more enjoyable moments in the wine industry. Yet by any 'objective' measure the vinous component of the experience (which was the reason for his involvement), was of limited 'quality'. The event also possessed a ritualistic dimension in the method of pouring the wine. It may be that ritual like this is important in fixing the memory and in framing the event as one worthy of later recollection.

Some informants made a positive link of wine memorableness to quality. One interviewee commented on whether or not 'distinctiveness' was a component of the quality of the very best wines:

Richard (PR): Memorableness, yes. Not necessarily distinctiveness as I interpret distinctiveness ... They probably have to be memorable in as much as they leave a lasting impression. And I can think of inexpensive examples and very expensive examples depending on the experience. It's an experiential thing. It's not just the wine, it's the dinner or the picnic or it's the person into whose eyes you were gazing or whatever.

Critically again, for Richard, the ‘quality’ of the wine goes beyond its ‘objective’ properties to the whole occasion. And in this context the ‘best’ wines are those which are most remembered, that prompt the recall of the place, or the person.

It thus seems evident that wine in the context of memory and recollection has a substantially symbolic function. Indeed one interviewee was explicit about this. The following comment was made in a discussion about the impact of situation on the quality of wine. She was asked if a wine was ‘better’ in a particular situation in which she had enjoyed than it might otherwise have been:

Olivia (ME): Emotionally it might have been better, but is the product itself better? No, as long as there's no faults in it. It's still the same wine but you can love things more for what they mean. You have an emotional construct with certain things 'cos they mean things to you.

For Olivia the wine was no ‘better’ because of the context, but the context determined that the wine had more meaning for her.

The memory of a wine may, in limited cases, have a utilitarian purpose but its role is much more a symbolic one. It seems to provide, in a changing world, a link with the past; specifically with one's family, and more generally with the stability of tradition and habit. It may be used explicitly to fix positive experiences and events. Critically, this symbolic function was offered most often by high involvement drinkers. Rarely did low or even medium-level involvement informants see a symbolic relationship between wine and memory, and when they did it was couched in the most general terms.

### **1.2.3 Image**

**Lifestyle:** Some drinkers explicitly saw wine as an integral part of their lifestyle, and this was volunteered as a motivating factor by low- as well as high-involvement drinkers.

Tim (ME): I suppose it's got to do a lot to do with lifestyle, the lifestyle that I've led and been brought up in.

This is not merely a professional (and therefore work-related) perspective:

SJC: First of all why you drink wine?

Morag (UC, high-involvement): Because I enjoy it and it's a part of my overall life.

At this level wine drinking fits into people's broad perspective about how they live their life, and what may be important to them. Not that wine is necessarily discretely of major significance, but that as part of an overall package it becomes important.

For at least one informant the consumption of wine was linked, perhaps a little wistfully, with an aspiration for an improved lifestyle.

Wendy (PR): It's part of what we need to do to socialise ... When we grew up we always had family dinners and we hear a lot about things now not connecting everyone ... they [families] have dinner at different times. I think it is important to have that time as relaxing. That's the nice thing about France, you have that two hour lunch everyday. I find with the way I live I have constantly to eat things - you have a snack all the time. Whereas if you have a two hour break, where you sit down and have a glass of wine and you have the full lunch that need is not there. Nurturing yourself with a bit of food. Workwise and for peace of mind you need to do that. Just stop rather than always [trying to] get to the next stop. Which is what we all do, we're all busy getting to the next stop.

*Self image:* The concept of wine as a part of lifestyle seemed to have a direct link to the drinker's self-image. For one informant this was explicitly acknowledged:

Don (ME): Why do I drink wine? Wine is an alcoholic beverage that, I suppose, stands for a lot. Wine as such has a lot of attributes that make it align with who I am perhaps, who I want to be.

The data suggested that wine consumption can be used to support one's own self-image (inner-directed) or enhance the way others view the individual, although often the two are connected. In the following comment a BC sees her wine consumption as giving her an sense of living dangerously, maybe of providing an edge of hidden decadence in an otherwise normal existence, although not so decadent that she has become an alcoholic:

Clare (BC, low-involvement): To me wine's a vice ... I feel very much lost without my wine sometimes. But it's not like an addiction type because I'm able to monitor it so much ... That's my personality, to make sure I'm not getting addicted to it, because it is such a

security blanket in a sense ... I'm not sure that I could do without it ... in this world. It may be a habit - but definitely a vice.

Self-image also extends to the specific wine one may select. Belinda (who owns a wine bar) makes a point of preferring (comparatively inexpensive) French wine over a reputable and pricey Australian wine.

Belinda (ME): It depends on what I eat too. I never find cabernet suits what I eat. I very rarely eat a big slice of unadorned steak. I eat duck, I eat chicken, I eat fish, so I tend to have lighter reds ... I can afford to have a bottle of Moss Wood cabernet if I want but I'd rather have a Cote du Rhone. It's the kind of girl I am.

The explicit rationale for this choice is that she opts for certain types of wine to match certain types of food. Nevertheless, she is also stating that she can make judgments beyond the simplistic cues of price and common reputation – Moss Wood is an expensive Margaret River cabernet sauvignon, Cotes du Rhone a generic and comparatively cheap French red blend. The 'kind of girl that she is' can buck trends and display the confidence to make an unorthodox choice. Belinda is apparently discussing how she views herself, using wine as a means of establishing inner-directed self-image. However, it is also possibly the case that she was making a point to the researcher, using her comments in an outer-directed fashion. In this way wine consumption can become a marker of distinction (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Status:** This function of using wine as a means of distinction links directly to its use to establish status. This is linked to the 'snobbish' reasons for wine consumption and likewise may create an 'anti-status' backlash by those who respond negatively to more 'pretentious' motivational factors. Nevertheless, even low-involvement BCs can be concerned to establish status. In the following exchange the interviewee has already explained how he tends to buy cask wine, but goes on to contrast that with his expensive taste in sparkling wines:

Dan (BC, low-involvement) My tastes in champagne and sparkling wines run to the fairly expensive, high quality, French end of town. I've never quite worked that out but I like the very dry champagne. I don't like your sweet sparklies, your Riccadonnas<sup>2</sup> and all those sorts of things. I'll have half a glass and that's it - they're just too overpowering.

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<sup>2</sup> A brand of Asti Spumante, a sweet, grapey wine from north-western Italy.

SJC: You refer to them as expensive, high quality, French end of town. You've also said that you think quality for you ultimately is what you like. Are you at that point saying price [equals quality]?

Dan. Yeah, I think what I'm doing is describing what they're considered [to be]. I mean, I have enjoyed - basically they're expensive, but they're also considered by the industry and society as [high quality]. Now whether... To be honest I don't know whether they are or not.

Dan, who has been involved in the liquor industry in the past, wanted to show that he had some knowledge and discernment, even if most of his day-to-day consumption was of cheap, cask wine. He wanted to use sparkling wine to modify that position (and possibly again impress his interviewer). When pressed, however, he became less certain about the current reputation of champagne. His assumption had been that price and the refinement of his choice would establish his status, but when the crude price-quality link is made the security of that 'position' wavers.

### **1.3 Utilitarian motivation**

As with any typology, there are not necessarily neat divisions between the three categories of the triadic paradigm of consumption. Thus it can be argued that the desire for alcohol, rather than being an experiential process as suggested above, may in fact be utilitarian (at least for those so addicted that their body craves the drug). Nevertheless, the utilitarian dimension for wine consumption seemed otherwise relatively unimportant to informants as a motivation to consume wine. The only main area where it applied was in the sense that wine can be used for lubrication.

#### **1.3.1 *Wine as lubrication***

The functional aspect of lubrication is noted by academics (Jackson, 2002), and from the data obtained by this study appears to be understood by drinkers. It seems to operate for them in two ways. First it can stimulate the appetite, encouraging a healthy hunger:

Ursula (BC, low-involvement): I don't drink things like coke ... and I don't like orange juices ... Water's not good for food, you shouldn't have water with food - so wine obviously stimulates the stomach.

Ursula dislikes soft drinks, and claims (without evidence) that water should not be drunk with food. Wine is, for her, the logical accompaniment.

Furthermore, wine physiologically harmonises with certain foods (for instance, tannin balancing protein, acid freshening fish), again a function recognised by the drinkers sampled:

Frances (UC, medium-involvement): I also think with some foods - wine cuts through the food.

At this point the utilitarian or functional reason for wine consumption shades into the aesthetic. Lubrication aids in the appreciation of good taste.

There is an additional, and related, area of lubrication – that of refreshment, already suggested by Ursula above:

Richard (PR): It's enjoyable, it's refreshing. Well not in the sense that a glass of water is. [But] as an accompaniment to food, because it's dry and because it's acidic and all those sorts of things. And it refreshes your palate, so that it's very useful as an adjunct to meals in what it does to your mouth.

This aspect of refreshment was referred to by a few informants, both professionals and non-professionals.

Nevertheless it is necessary to note that this whole area, of lubrication and refreshment, was generally a concern of higher involvement consumers, and especially professionals. Ursula (quoted above) was the only low-involvement drinker to express any sense of the functional aspect of wine drinking. Her comments on this are illuminating, for she does not drink coke, juices or water (at least with food), so for her wine is the drink of refreshment and stimulation. It seems probable that other low-involvement drinkers naturally gravitate to soft drinks or beer as their natural drinks of refreshment, and tend to think of wine primarily as an aesthetic accompaniment to a meal, rather than as a lubricant. An alternative, or maybe symbiotic, interpretation is that the high-involvement drinkers have the knowledge to rationalise their consumption in such a functional (physiological) manner – thus giving themselves an 'legitimate' reason for their 'vice'.

## 1.4 It's not just a drink...

For a number of drinkers the symbolic function of wine consumption has an impact beyond the merely physical; it offers deep psychological significance. This was most articulately – and perhaps more frequently - expressed by the higher involvement drinkers, but was not an attitude exclusive to them.

Simon (UC, high-involvement): I think if you didn't have all the sort of finer things in life - which includes good food, good wine, good friends and poetry and music - all those sorts of things, then eventually your wellbeing would decline. Your level of morale, personal morale would decline. You'd have to end up being depressed or suicidal or something. It's better to keep working on these things and make the effort.

Generally this deep psychological significance has a relationship to the other, more overt reasons for drinking which have already been outlined. Thus for instance, there may be a relationship with taste:

Wendy (PR): You're going to ask me to define this too - but I'm not going to be able to - so it's a mystery. Something you can't define. So what is that character that makes that wine so special that everyone enjoys it but no one can actually say exactly what it is? .... I suppose that great wine does transport us, they take us somewhere else ... Like we did on Friday - open a bottle of 1986 Clos de Mesnil and [it's] completely transporting. You can sit there and you can say 'it's completely dry, it's got lots of layers of flavour, it's got texture it's still got varietal definition'. In effect you can definitely pick it as chardonnay, got a very fine bead but the overall effect was you know even after one mouthful your day wasn't so bad ... And I don't know why that happens ... That is the mystery. I can spend probably 15 minutes describing that flavour [of] Mesnil - you know it's got this, it's got that, but I can't say why it makes me feel good. I wouldn't know what it was. And I don't think anyone would.

Wendy is a winemaker who has also been a show judge, as well as having finely tuned organoleptic skills to supplement a technical analysis. Yet, ultimately the combination of flavours and the structure of the wine do something for her that – with all her knowledge and skill - she cannot explain. She can dissect it, and see how it has been produced, yet the way it 'transports' her remains a mystery. The fact that she chooses an exclusive and expensive wine suggests that it may not apply to all wines, but at least for some that she drinks it is the case.

Wendy focused on the impact that a single wine had on her, but the complete diversity offered by a range of wines may provide a similar experience - in one case from the wine's potential development.

Greg (ME): It's a drink that's got diversity, it's going to change through the year so you've got an element of mystique there as well.

Greg is not – at this stage – focusing on just one wine, as Wendy did with the Clos de Mesnil, but on the ‘mystique’ offered by range, and the way the wine develops in the bottle. Thus diversity and challenge bring their own sense of wonder at the product.

As well as taste and diversity, situation and ritual may have an impact on this intense psychological sensation. In the following extract Florence developed her ideas about the meals that she and her husband share most evenings at home:

Florence (BC, low-involvement): It's an experience. So it's not just social it's something perhaps beyond that which is about the taste but it's certainly about the experience and that's bigger than just a smell, a taste, a sound.

She may not have the professional knowledge of Wendy allowing her to analyse it so carefully, and therefore seemed more tentative, but she still has some feeling that the importance of the situation for her is more than just the sum of its parts – the ‘smell, taste or sound.’

Ultimately this deep psychological perspective on wine may attain a quasi-spiritual perspective. Simon, who was quoted at the commencement of this section, added the following during a discussion about wine and the arts:

Simon (UC): It's like asking about art in that sense, so it's something that you have an intuitive quality for. Something that you identify with and something that enriches you personally - so in that sense there's a spiritual quality to it. In the sense that without it - you look at the negation - if there were no poetry, there were no music, there were no paintings and no wine basically you'd go and say 'well this is the end of it.' And that's the way I feel. So it enhances your life. It enhances you as a person, I think. They're all things that add to your life - whereas if all you did was just get up and just eat bran or weetbix or cereal liquids - all that sort of stuff - and drank Horlicks and just worked all day then life would be too dull. So it enriches and embellishes your life in that sort of sense.



## **2 The aesthetic nature of wine**

### **2.1 Introduction**

It has been suggested earlier in the review of the literature on the subject of aesthetics that an examination of the aesthetic nature of a product involves three aspects: the processes of aesthetic consumption; the features which define an aesthetic product; and the criteria used to form aesthetic judgments (the ‘general canons’). Consumer views on the aesthetic nature of wine are examined below in the context of each of these. Initially, however, it is important to note the differing perspectives amongst informants about whether or not wine does have an aesthetic nature. It is also necessary to advance a caveat about informants’ perspectives on the aesthetic nature of wine. They were given no warning that the subject would be addressed, nor any ‘training’ in what aesthetics may entail. The topic was addressed obliquely – by asking them if they felt that there were any similarities between wine and music (or art). Where the informants had separate aesthetic interests (one was a graphic designer and a number were highly involved consumers of music) then they often found the issue easier to address. Nevertheless, generally it was conceptually hard for them to come to terms with the subject initially and they had to work through the ideas before reaching any conclusions. On occasions the aesthetic perspective on wine was raised voluntarily by informants, and at times data were also obtained by observation of the behaviour of focus group participants.

#### ***2.1.1 Does wine have an aesthetic nature?***

Overwhelmingly (by a ratio of about 3:1) informants considered that the consumption of wine shows some similarities to the appreciation of ‘pure’ art forms – especially music or painting. A very few informants were uncertain about their response, either because they failed to grasp the importance of the question or because they were unable or unwilling to reach a final conclusion. In its most extreme form the case for the similarity between wine and artworks was made as follows:

Simon (UC, high-involvement): Fundamentally you can make the connection between music, literature, art and wine. Without them life

wouldn't be worth living. I think that's the fundamental thing. You can certainly drop one or two of them but if you didn't have any expressive qualities in your life then there would be no ... way of growing as a human being.

This was repeated, although usually with a less metaphysical tone, by most others. One exception was a focus group participant who discounted any similarity on the grounds that wine – unlike art-works – conveyed no message:

Alison (SC, medium involvement): But [wine] doesn't tell me anything deep or meaningful. A good artist will be often conveying a view about something. A wine isn't a social comment. You either enjoy it or you don't.

Alison developed her argument more comprehensively than most other informants. As well as the lack of a message she added that wine for her had a social function, promoting human interaction, rather than being something that one spent time evaluating closely. Additionally she noted:

Alison: I will appreciate something that aesthetically I might not find pleasing. But I can appreciate it. If I don't find the wine pleasing I don't like it.

She observed that one can appreciate aesthetic objects without liking them (a point made by other informants about wine itself). Of wine, however, she did not accept that preference could be divorced from evaluation.

Other informants considered that there were some likenesses between the consumption of wine and artworks, but noted that the former had a more substantial social context:

Tony (UC, high-involvement): Yes to a degree [there is a similarity] ... I mean, I do like art - but I guess wine's a more human thing ... I think it's just because [wine] acts as a lubricant for the interaction between people. Whilst looking at art you're looking at a static thing to a degree.

For Tony wine facilitates social interaction, and has social relevance, in a way which art does not. He did go on to observe, however, that even art can act like that:

Tony: Yes ... you can have two people chattering vigorously over a Picasso in the gallery. And I guess that is providing that interaction. But I guess wine is a physical, you actually take it in, it's intoxicating, a bit like a drug.

Ultimately, Tony suggests, it is the intoxicating element in the wine, as well as the context of use, which means that its social dimension is far broader than that of art.

Specifically for those informants who considered that the response to wine involved similar processes to the response to artworks, there were three key reasons offered, of broadly similar weight. The most concentrated of these was the pleasure – primarily sensory – offered by aesthetic processes. Nearly as important was the similarity of evaluative processes undertaken (especially involving cognitive responses, the importance of learning and education in developing evaluative skills, and the focus required by the process). The third key similarity revolved around the relevance of personal taste in response to wine and to artworks. Each of these reasons is discussed in greater detail below.

## **2.2 Wine, pleasure and aesthetic experience**

The main similarity offered by drinkers between the experience of wine and music (or any other artwork) was that of the experiential similarities between the consumption of wine and consumption of the arts. Critically pleasure, as a response, was seen as a common link between the two.

Sue (SC, medium-involvement): It doesn't matter [as long as] you enjoy the music. You don't have to know the ins and outs of it, if you just enjoy listening to it. And it's just [the same] enjoying wine. It's just a pleasurable pursuit.

Philip (UC, high-involvement): I think wine first and foremost is about enjoyment - and that's probably the same with art and music. It's the same thing.

This was a perspective shared by some members of all reference groups, and across all levels of involvement with wine. For much of the time that experience seems to fit with a broad sense of 'hedonic pleasure' (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985), however, occasionally it becomes much deeper, and operates as a 'profound experience':

Tom (winemaker, high-involvement): It's that unspoken thing, that all comes together ... you want the music thing, where you just go 'wow that piece of music!' I don't have to hear it a lot of times [it's] just like 'bang', it makes my hair stand on end! And it's the same with a wine. You can have wines with intensity and complexity but completely out of balance or they don't sort of all harmonise together in the right way so ... [but with great wine it's] just this seamlessness. You keep looking at it, and looking at it, and you can see more and more and more into it ... I always find that when I start to contradict myself about what I'm saying about a wine then I enjoy it.

Tom noted the impact of music on him in some detail, acknowledging that music may be good or bad, and have different effects on him. Some music, though, makes such a profound impression that it makes his hair stand on end and occasionally a wine can also offer that same profound experience. An exchange in a PR focus group reinforces this perspective, using terms that – unconsciously – very closely reflect the concept of the ‘flow’ experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990).

Hal: It's those great wines that you've had in the past that have had such an emotional effect on you that that's what you're aiming for.

Maria: That's true.

Hal: Great wines that flow through you like nothing else. It's an amazing, heightened experience, that you've never had before. And you say that's all just coming from this thing in the glass. I mean that's very intoxicating, morish, you want more of that.

Maria: It's gaining those benchmarks

Hal: Yeah, I know the wines that have the emotional effect. The big, emotional - not emotional intently...

Maria: ...It is emotional because I remember the first time I tried...

Hal: ...It's not outwardly emotional. It's internal, it's a feeling.

Maria: [Spoken to Hal.] What was the wine for you?

Hal: Oh God, [laughter]

Maria: One for me was '55 Grange which I tasted in 1973 at the Adelaide wine show. I just couldn't believe it was so good...

These winemakers deal with wine all the time, and comments elsewhere show that they are aware that – substantially – they are producing a product for sale to the public. Nevertheless, as they suggest, some wines make a profound impact on them and they would like to replicate that impact on the consumers of the wines that they make. Maria – using an explicitly sexual reference – asks Hal about the first wine which had that kind of impact on him, and can herself remember, 28 years after the event, the first wine which gave her such a profound experience.

This idea that the experience of wine could be uplifting or profound in its impact was mentioned by a number of other informants, but invariably they were highly-involved drinkers, tending to respond to a wine in both sensory and very cognitive, evaluative terms. Low- and medium-involvement consumers appeared not to have any experience which they could articulate beyond general hedonic pleasure.

### **2.2.1 *The nature of the aesthetic response in wine***

Some drinkers see the aesthetic response to wine and artworks as being primarily sensory. Thus:

SJC: Is there a similarity between the appreciation of wine and the appreciation of music?

Ursula (BC, low-involvement): [They're] sensuous. Music can make you feel pretty jumpy. Some art can make you feel pretty sick. I suppose it all requires a sensual response as opposed to just an intellectual response.

The emphasis on the sensuous nature of wine appreciation was just as likely to be held by high-involvement drinkers:

Richard (winemaker): It's a sensual thing in that you are using your senses. Unfortunately [for] a lot of people the word sensual gets confused with sexual. But sensual means of the senses ... and it's something you are using your senses for. You are looking at it, you are smelling it, you are tasting it. In the case of music I guess you are hearing it.

The primary response for Richard was the instinctive, sensory response of smell and taste for wine, and hearing for music. Richard was – as a winemaker – also quite cognitive in his approach to wine. Nevertheless the sensory response was paramount for him.

For other informants the key similarities between the response to wine and to artworks were emotional. In the following extract Mary has been asked if she sees similarities between the experience of wine and of music:

Mary (UC, medium-involvement) Yeah I do ... All of those sorts of things that you do because it makes you feel good. Or you listen to because it makes you feel good. It's similar in that respect.

For Mary the key link between wine and music was their affective impact. Both can make you feel good. However, for most informants the key form of response was cognitive – which leads on to the next similarity offered between wine and artwork, based on cognitive processes - the importance of aesthetic evaluation in the response to both of them.

## 2.3 Aesthetic evaluation

The consumption of wine, like the consumption of artworks, involved an evaluative process for many informants:

Frank (SC, low-involvement): I think music probably [is] similar to wine. [Like] music [I] pick out the wines I like and similarly I actually enjoy the evaluation of it more. It takes time to look at a picture and analyse the painting.

Analysis inevitably leads to judgments – the process of appreciation:

Diana (SC, medium-involvement): I suppose there is a point of similarity there. Music or art, theatre or all those sorts of things - you're making a judgment and deciding what you want.

These processes – evaluation and judgment – meant that some informants stressed that a key similarity between wine and artworks was the reliance on cognition. Thus:

Martha (ME): Yes, I like to think of wine appreciation as cerebral, I certainly think of it as a cerebral art ... And so I would think of art.

Despite the quotation from Frank above, the idea that there was a common approach to the aesthetic evaluation of both wine and artworks tended to be a view held by medium- and high-involvement drinkers. The particular reliance on highly analytic, cognitive approaches to evaluation (as displayed by Martha) was almost exclusively a trait held by wine professionals. The process of evaluation was seen by informants to comprise three elements. These were: the need for focus; the importance of education and expertise; and the impact of exploration and challenge.

### 2.3.1 *The importance of focus*

In reflection of the common philosophical view that aesthetic ‘consumption’ requires concentrated aesthetic attention (Dickie, 1971; Scruton, 1979; Sibley, 2001), a number of informants developed the idea of aesthetic evaluation to suggest that both wine and artworks require focus. Thus, comparing wine and paintings:

Tina (SC, medium-involvement): You need to pay attention, to take time to get into them. I take time, as I don't want other people to influence me. I try and try again, and ensure that I'm complete with it ... I think if you like looking at paintings, you will like drinking wine as well.

For Tina this focus requires time and the expenditure of emotional energy. It is not something that should be influenced by others, but a practice which she considers her

responsibility. She argued that if you are prepared to undertake that technique of concentrated attention with art, then you will probably enjoy doing it with wine as well. This perspective is echoed by Richard – earlier seen concentrating on the sensory response to wine and music:

Richard (winemaker): It's something that in a classical sense demands concentration. People close their eyes to listen to music, perhaps, people close their eyes to taste - seriously taste – wine, and seriously taste food. If you're going to seriously read a book you probably would choose to do it in a quiet room rather than a crowded train station. Yeah, demands focus, concentration.

What Richard described is an activity which would be recognised by many psychologists and philosophers of aesthetics as typical of aesthetic engagement. Richard saw this operating for music or novels and extended the practice to both food and wine. He sees focus as necessary for the accurate dissection of the structure of wine just as for of music. Similarly:

Sally (ME): Somebody said to me once they compared tasting wine to listening to music - because once you know what the various components are you can pick the instruments playing etc. And you can pick the various qualities in the wine. You can pick them out and make your evaluation.

Focus, Sally argues, is necessary because wine, like music, is an amalgam of a number of components, and to understand and evaluate the wine you need to spend time pulling those components apart.

### ***2.3.2 The importance of education and experience***

For informants who considered aesthetic evaluation to be part of the response to wine, the gaining of knowledge and skill was often perceived to be important. Knowledge and skill are what give the informed critic the ability to detect the fine nuances necessary for effective evaluation.

Hal (winemaker): At the high end [consider] the difference between two great tenors. A highly educated muso<sup>3</sup> would be able to pick the subtle differences and say 'well this one was quite cluey, better than this one for these reasons.' Whereas I'd say 'well they were both pretty fabulous.' That's where we come to. I guess our expertise is in being able to say 'this bottle of Chateau Margaux ... is better than this

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<sup>3</sup> Australian slang for a musician.

bottle of Mouton' - or something. And some people mightn't be able to see that.

This ability to appreciate is based on two related factors. The detailed knowledge accumulated by years of study and the experience in seeing 'subtle differences' gained from considerable application of that knowledge. Note that Hal, like many high-involvement drinkers, made the point that he had the ability to evaluate the nuances of his chosen field – wine – whereas he would not have similar skills in another field of aesthetic consumption. A consumer made a similar comment on the importance of skill and experience, based on her background as a novelist:

Frances (UC, medium-involvement): I think that if you read a lot of novels - as I do - you can become selective. And I think that does enhance your appreciation. If you have very little experience of novels then you don't have the points of comparison - and so on. [So] that you might think 'I really like this novel I'll look for this author again'. But you don't have that wide range of comparisons to tell you this is a good writer. And I think it's the same with wine. If you've only drunk cask wine then how do you appreciate others?

Experience, Frances argued, is based on the consumption of a wide range of the aesthetic product type. This experience allows for comparison, and the comparison engenders effective selection. If you limit your consumption experiences then you are unable to appreciate the full range of an aesthetic product category.

### ***2.3.3 The role of exploration and challenge***

For many informants the enjoyment of the process of evaluating wine and artworks seemed to be rooted in the challenge of the works and the chance to explore them. Challenge and exploration engage their knowledge and skill:

William (UC, high-involvement): If it's art there's a wide range of choice there. And a lot of people like the experience of everything - so that they can find their preferences. So I think you're right - you're saying people still explore a broad range so they can find their choice.

William saw the experience of a range of aesthetic experiences as positive, implying that people enjoy the process of making decisions about their predilections. As well as the exploration of that diversity, there is the challenge of understanding. What follows is from an interviewee who raised the similarities between wine and music without any prompting:



Gerhard (UC, high-involvement): I think in both cases you need to know what makes it tick. In music you need to know how music evolved, what's behind it. The link between mathematics and music is an obvious one. And once you understand certain things like that you can appreciate music, even if it's not to your liking. Sometimes you find if you realise the amount of work that has gone into growing the wine, that's gone into making the wine, that's gone into storing the wine - you can appreciate it for its quality even if you don't like its style.

The challenge, for Gerhard, is to know what makes both wine and music 'tick'.

Processes and philosophy seem crucial to his aesthetic appreciation of the product.

The focus on challenge and exploration was very firmly an element of aesthetic appreciation expressed by medium- and high-involvement drinkers, with no low involvement consumers noting it as a link between wine and artworks.

## **2.4 Personal taste**

Personal taste was almost as significant to informants as pleasure and the function of aesthetic evaluation as an indicator that wine consumption is a quasi-aesthetic experience. Thus:

Hetty (SC, low-involvement): If I was looking at art or music I think it would come down to my personal taste. Which is the same as wine - so in that way, I think, [they are] similar.

Hetty makes the point clearly that one's response to artworks is subjective and individual. Preference for wine is likewise a matter of personal taste – and this subjective position is one way in which wine is similar to art or music. This point was regularly made, as the following extract from a focus group shows:

Ellie (BC, medium-involvement): I suppose whether you like music, or whether you like poetry, or whether you like wine all comes down to personal taste - which is [what] we've been very much talking about.

Angela (BC, low-involvement): Like if you're a classical music fan ... you could be a straight red wine drinker, nothing else. Or you could be a chardonnay drinker [but] you sort of like sparkling wine [as well].

Ellie seemed to be making a general point that preference for aesthetic products generally relates to personal taste. Angela expanded that theme to suggest that the similarity is based on specific preferences within product types.

This perspective, which linked wine to artworks because of the importance of personal taste, tended to be held more by low- and medium-involvement informants and less by those with a high-involvement. Where higher involvement drinkers did refer to personal taste, they often did it in the third person – noting the personal taste of others as a distinguishing feature.

A contrast to this emphasis on the relevance of personal taste as a link between wine and other aesthetic products was the perspective of a few respondents that there exists a ‘commonality of response’ to wine and other aesthetic products. The effect of this was to suggest that wine and artworks were similar not because they rely on an individual’s personal taste, but because there is a common awareness of how good they are. This recalls the philosophical perspective on the objectivity of aesthetic judgements (Hume, 1757/1998; Railton, 1998). Thus, in one PR focus group, Roger considers that there are similarities between wine and artworks:

Roger: Yeah, I think so ... Often a hallmark of a good work is that it's appealing to everyone regardless of their level of expertise. A painting might be appealing to everyone. [They] will go 'wow that's really good, obviously someone's talented, they've put a lot into it. There's no way I could do that – it looks really impressive'. Off they go - the punter - and an expert comes along and goes 'wow that is amazing ... their use of shadow and line and light and all of that sort of thing...' Similarly with wine.

...

Maria: It's about classic things.

Hal: Creative arts - all the things that represent quality. They're transferable across all of them.

Maria: And if you took something that's considered to be high quality into a primitive, naïve group they would still recognise the quality from the rubbish.

Roger maintained that the quality of an aesthetic product can potentially be recognised by anyone, whether experts or amateurs (‘punter’) – even though the former are more easily able to rationalise or explain their response (the ‘use of shadow and line and light’). Maria and Hal concur, suggesting that the quality of a ‘classic’ aesthetic product is obvious – whatever the product type - and that the least skilled have the ability to evaluate the quality of the product. This is the opposite of the approach which dismisses aesthetic taste as no more than personal preference and was a perspective held by a few informants, all of them high-involvement drinkers.

## 2.5 Wine and beauty

There was a strong sense in the responses of some informants that wine, as a product, has an element of beauty (in the aesthetic sense) about it. This was rarely directly referred to, probably because in common parlance beauty is a term most instantly used for what is visually appealing. However, it remained implicit in much of what they said, and for one informant became explicit:

Wendy (Winemaker): [At a concert, art-gallery or wine tasting] you're looking for something that's going to be inspiring and beautiful. Yeah, I guess beauty can be seen in all things. And I see [that] wine production - perhaps not the commercial end so much - should be creative. Although wine ... should be an everyday thing for everybody. But you know, special bottles of wine, certainly I'd rate in that category [as beautiful].

There is a tension in what Wendy is thinking through. She is not sure where to place mass-produced wine styles as objects of beauty. Nevertheless, special bottles – ones which are not necessarily drunk on a day-to-day basis – should be considered ‘inspiring and beautiful, just as a concert could.’

Wendy’s perspective was shared by a few other professional informants. However, it became more apparent as an implicit perspective, such as in the previous comment of the winemaker Tom that there are some wines ‘just like “bang”, it makes my hair stand on end’. This implicit view also became apparent in a number of response to the wines tasted in the focus groups. Thus:

Phillip (UC, high-involvement): I think wine number 3's absolutely thrilling if you look at the style. The other three wines are good confident wines. Number four would probably be the second best. Wine number three. Usually most of the wines you try have got that primary fruit characteristic - you don't hang on to something for ten years. This one's got a bit of age - but it's very complex. It's got amazing length. I can taste that 30 seconds after I'd finished it. It's got some really good, restrained fruit - very elegant. I think it's just a fantastic wine, absolutely fantastic.

The enthusiasm Philip showed suggests a real sense of beauty in his choice. He displayed pleasure, evaluation and personal taste but these all need to have a stimulus and that stimulus can be the beauty of the product.

## 2.6 Wine as an artwork

Whereas most informants considered that the consumption process of wine and artworks had similarities, a few also made a direct link between wine as a product and other aesthetic products. This was generally by suggesting that wine was an artwork itself. Thus:

Ellie (BC, medium involvement): It involves creating something, if you're creating music or you're creating art or you're creating a wine.

This perspective was held by a range of informants, across all involvement levels, but as one might expect, was best formulated by the 'artists' themselves, the winemakers:

Danielle: I really think there's a huge similarity between art and wine, I really do. I just think it is a true artist that comes up with a very good quality, unique wine ... So the way I see it is you use like a palette and a canvas. And something that is unique in the art world is not dissimilar to a bottle of wine in the wine world.

[later]

Danielle: Well I think of Torbreck wines. The guy who makes Torbreck wines - he's an artist. He hasn't had much training or whatever. He's done lots of vintages but ... apparently he hasn't done a wine science degree or anything. But his wine is just amazing to me.

Danielle was explicit that a good wine is like a good work of art, created from a palette of material (grapes), and unique. She used as a specific example a current Australian wine with 'cult' status, and noted – approvingly – that the winemaker does not actually have a formal winemaking education. There is possibly an implicit suggestion that this freedom from the constraints of being trained in a particular way has allowed the winemaker's artistic side to flourish.

There were, however, dissenting perspectives, even amongst winemakers. Not all of them saw their role as similar to that of the artist:

Clive: Art is more an expression of emotions, whereas wine is more scientific, or agricultural or industrial. It's got creative elements in it but also at the end it's pragmatic.

By 'pragmatic' Clive may have meant crafted. He accepts that there is an element of creativity in what he does, but he works in a more scientific way than the artist. He fabricates a product which has, in his perspective, less emotional content than artists

do. Another winemaker, however, viewed the wine/art link as less one of creativity than of interpretation:

SJC: Do you think there's any similarity between the impact wine has on you and that music has on you?

Mark: I was thinking about this the other day when I was listening to [some music] ... Yeah, you can get 20 different musicians and you ask them to interpret one piece of music and they'll all do it fairly differently. But there might be only two or three that you really like personally, yeah.

Mark's perspective is that the impact of wine and the impact of music are similar – because in each case one is responding to an interpretation of art. Winemakers 'interpret' the grapes (and perhaps the vineyard) in what they make, as musicians interpret a piece of music – but the consumer may make selective evaluative judgments about that interpretation. This perspective – that the similarities lie in interpretation, not creation, was repeated by consumers as well as professionals.

## **2.7 Aesthetic judgments of wine**

It was suggested in the literature review in chapter 3, that there may be common evaluative criteria – general canons - across a range of aesthetic products. These criteria comprise the unity (balance), complexity and intensity of the product. Whilst informants were not prompted about these criteria, many of those who made the link between wine and artworks referred to them. The most common link was made on the subject of balance – the importance of balance in wine, compared to balance in artworks:

Waldemar (SC, medium-involvement): If [wine and art] balance within themselves it works. If they are out of balance - no matter in what direction - it won't work.

Waldemar's viewpoint was repeated by a number of other informants:

Ellie (BC, medium-involvement): You're looking for a balance between notes and words ... for symmetry of notes on the page - looking for all that sort of stuff. When you make a wine you're doing the same sort of thing. You're looking for balance, you want to create flavours, you want nice body, you want a nice nose - and all of that stuff to meld in together.

As the notes of a piece of music or the words of a poem should provide internal balance – unity – to the artwork, so the flavour, body and aroma of a wine should all balance and resolve themselves into a harmonious whole.

Some informants explicitly used the term complexity about wine and artworks. One described it in a slightly different fashion when questioned about the wine/music correspondence:

Sally (ME): The complexity thing is similar. So I think - definitely. I agree, I think that's a really interesting comparison to make with wine tasting.

Pam: I've never heard that before in my life.

Sally: You don't know what you're looking for. So you don't know what the aroma of – say - French oak is on a red. And you don't know what an oboe sounds like on its own. Well then, you're not going to pick the oboe out of an orchestral piece if you don't know what it sounds like on its own ... Once you're familiar with that you can hear it through an orchestral piece.

Sally sees issues of complexity of wine and music and disentangling the complex components (such as oak or an oboe) as related processes. For her, complexity is key to the evaluative process of aesthetic products.

It is worth noting, however, that complexity was not an invariable aspect of this comparison. The simple 'purity' of wine, or a piece of music, could operate in the same fashion, as this extract from a focus group suggested:

Mike (UC, medium-involvement): But some really good music doesn't have complexity ... Some modern 20th century music is really simple, really minimalist. So I wouldn't necessarily say music I like is complex.

Roz (UC, medium-involvement): But would you say that about all the wines? No probably not - you wouldn't necessarily say 'the wines I like have to be complex' so...

Mike: ...I wouldn't say I like a simple [wine] but sometimes I like simple music...

Leo (UC, high-involvement): But you can have a simple, nice wine.

Mike was struggling with the concept that complexity is necessary to the enjoyment of good wine and good music – suggesting that good music can nevertheless be quite simple. He was uncertain that he can apply the same criterion to wine, but Leo concluded that a simple wine could still be good (presumably if it displays other elements of quality, such as intensity and balance).

The sense of 'profound experience' which some informants felt with 'great' wines has been alluded to. Some informants used similar terms to intensity in the context of the aesthetic:

William (UC, medium-involvement): You can go to the theatre and listen to a piece of music ... and it's quite an experience. And that's fullness and that's richness of character. And you get a completely different appreciation of the performance and perhaps the quality of music ... [similarly] if you were in the bowels of some nice winery having a 10 year old red or something. And having a special experience that you haven't had before.

The great experience can have 'fullness' or 'richness of character' – something evident in a concert, but also replicable as part of a special experience in a wine cellar with a venerable wine. Intensity is not explicitly mentioned – but is nevertheless implied in this comparison.

In addition to the three general canons, the use of distinctiveness as a key component of aesthetic evaluation was also alluded to. In the following extract – not taken from a specific discussion about aesthetics, a specific comparison was made:

Umberto (ME): It's like a great novel. It's like a differentiation between ... Dickens and Bleak House, and Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet. There should be a point of distinctiveness. There should be something that separates it from the rest ... You might have the range of first growth Bordeaux for example, or a range of wines from Pauillac as being those different interpretations of it. There should be something that sets them apart ... Equally a different author might be a Barossa Valley compared to Cote Rotie. These huge differences just jump out at you, where you can say 'oh that's that particular author, that's that particular author, or that particular creator.'

Umberto makes, unprompted, the link between wine as art and the novel, based on the fundamental issue of the points of differentiation within the product class. Even within a small wine region, such as Pauillac in Bordeaux, differences between the varying producers and their interpretation of their raw material are critical to their evaluation and enjoyment. Other informants, particularly of higher involvement levels, made similar, though often less-explicit, analogies.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Informants generally saw similarities between the consumption of wine and the consumption of aesthetic products – notably music, which is what they were specifically questioned about. This does not necessarily qualify wine as an aesthetic product, but it is worth noting that the experiences and responses offered by informants on the subject of wine tend to match generally the criteria set down for aesthetic consumption as outlined in chapter 2.

Most notably the correspondences noted by informants cover three main areas. First wine, like artworks, can invoke a sense of pleasure – including an awareness of the beauty of the product. This includes both a ‘hedonic experience’ – the general experience of pleasure - and a deeper, more profound aesthetic experience. Second the consumption of wine and of artworks both involve evaluative processes – including sensory and affective elements but most especially comprising cognitive responses. Experience, challenge and the need for focus are seen to be key elements of this practice. Third like the appreciation of art, there seems to be a paradoxical response to wine; it can be seen to reflect both personal taste – a subjective reaction – but also shared evaluative response, with the idea that everyone can appreciate both its quality and its qualities. Finally there seems to be an element of beauty in wine, although few informants directly referred to it.

Further, it is clear that some of the criteria suggested for the evaluation of artworks – unity/balance, complexity and intensity are perceived by some informants to apply in the same way to wine. Although they may not have considered it previously, and indeed may not believe it to be important, most informants seemed to view the consumption of wine as an aesthetic process.



# **CHAPTER 7:**

## **THE NATURE OF WINE QUALITY**

This chapter reports the findings relating to two main ideas. The first is the conceptualisation of quality by the informants. This part examines their abstract understanding of the existence of quality, using the fourfold typology previously suggested in figure 3.1 - the absolute/relative and objective/subjective dichotomies. The second main theme is an exposition of the informants' views on the substance of wine quality. This breaks quality down into various components (referred to as dimensions) which may be extrinsic to the wine - not perceived when the wine is tasted - or intrinsic to it and thus part of what is tasted in the glass. However, before these themes can be considered, it is relevant to explore some contextual issues which relate to drinkers' understanding of wine quality, and are relevant to both the conceptualisation and substance of quality.

### **1 The context of quality in wine**

Before one can examine the different ways in which drinkers view the concept of quality in wine it is necessary to consider a number of factors which provide a context for the varying views they may hold. Three such contextual issues were raised by informants: first, many drinkers may have conceptual difficulties with an abstract idea like quality; further some show an ambivalence about the importance or role of quality; finally there is a widespread perspective that quality operates on a continuum, that there are different grades of quality, rather than it simply being dichotomous (either the presence of quality or its absence).

#### **1.1 Conceptual difficulties**

When asked about the nature of quality in wine some informants tended to give an immediate response that the question was difficult:

Ian (BC, low-involvement): I think quality's an interesting one. It's a tough one to actually put your finger on.

This was a view shared some informants from all reference groups, and with varying levels of involvement:

Vince (PR): It's really hard to define what quality is.

In part such responses were probably given because quality generally is perceived by consumers to be an abstract concept. Informants were not given advance notice of the focus of the interviews, nor a preprepared list of questions. Consequently they had little time to analyse their views on such an intangible topic before responding. Thus, for some the abstract function of conceptualising quality or the request to categorise its dimensions<sup>1</sup> was considered difficult. For certain informants this was the result of a feeling that they lacked the relevant experience:

Nettie (BC, low-involvement): I understand that I don't understand much about wine quality. I've heard all the terminology, 'something on the nose, and a bit on the back of the palate and the front of the palate - and it's finished with this and decorated with that.' I don't understand. I know the terminology but I don't really understand what it means.

Nettie accepts that some form of external (objective) quality exists, and she sees that a specialist jargon exists for framing it – but she cannot understand the language so she is unable to perceive the nature of quality in wine. For her quality is a meaningless construct, useful only for those who have been taught how to use 'winespeak', but irrelevant to her pursuit of enjoyment of the product.

For others the difficulty with the concept of wine quality is the multiple definitions of quality, or the multiple modes within which it can operate.

SJC: If I ask you about wine quality, what do you understand by that term?

Kate (PR): Well it's really - I think it's interesting because you can look at it from different levels.

Kate proceeded to offer various levels, such as price relativity, technical correctness in production and grape quality. However, when questioned about the latter, she again concluded that the topic was hard to get to grips with:

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<sup>1</sup> Dimension is used throughout this chapter as a term for a component or sub-category of quality. The dimensions perceived by wine drinkers are examined in detail in section 3.

Kate: [Grape quality is] a sort of form of lusciousness - but that's not necessarily based on body. You can have a fairly light bodied wine that has texture and has structure. And you can have those wines that actually can have some texture and structure but not necessarily be terribly expensive. But they are... [pause]. Difficult questions - god... [long pause]. Quality? On each different level there's different things you can say.

Kate offered a link between the quality of grapes and the weight and texture of wine – but whilst she could comment on possible dimensions of quality, she found it hard to be precise about its overall, global nature.

Additionally it is necessary to note that because of the conceptual difficulties, informants' perspectives on the nature of quality were unstable. The following is an extract from a SC focus group. Cleo's two comments were separated by about 45 minutes of discussion:

Cleo (medium-involvement): I hardly ever buy expensive wines ... I just find the ones that I like. So they are - of course - good quality because they taste good to me.

...

Cleo: I actually don't think I have got any nose for quality at all. Because the big, prize-winning wines ... that you read about all the time (I read the wine columns in the Sydney Morning Herald and things like that) sometimes when I try them they're no better to me than the \$12 or so wines that I know I enjoy.

Initially Cleo determined that quality is what she likes, but ultimately she tended to the view that quality is something external to her, which is beyond her powers to judge. This discrepancy will be examined later in more detail – but it is used here as an example of how perspectives can shift when informants have an abstract idea to come to terms with.

For some, the difficulty in conceptualising or defining wine quality meant that they found it easier to focus on poor quality than good quality.

SJC: If I asked you about the idea of quality in wine what do you think quality is?

Norman (BC, low-involvement): I'm not particularly fastidious about wines and to my mind the quality is such [that] it is drinkable, pleasant. But I did actually buy a cask of Kaiserstuhl Moselle the other week - and I took it home and that had got a very boxy taste to it. It had gone off. It had been in the sun or something ... and it was a

really unpleasant taste. In fact I couldn't even manage a glassful and I took it back and swapped it for another one.

Norman offered the fairly uncomplicated and broad 'drinkable, pleasant' as his definition of quality yet was, in his anecdote, apparently much more at ease in apprehending the absence of quality in a wine. Norman elsewhere showed little interest in expensive wines and little complexity in his conceptualisation of quality, yet he can express distaste vigorously when a wine is unpleasant. Even the opportunity to finish the first glass, before returning the cask, was eschewed, so awful was the wine. Avoiding poor quality, as the converse of what is sought, was often referred to by informants, and seemed to be an important issue for them.

Norman's approach, with its emphasis on poor quality was not necessarily a view restricted to BCs or low-involvement consumers:

SJC: What do you understand by quality in wine?

Frances (UC, medium-involvement): I would never drink a cask any more. I've been through the cask phase and, I guess, I see that as a very poor quality wine. And if there's only a cask on offer then I probably would - but it's the only time I've drunk water in preference to the wine.

Frances subsequently offered a more positive view on quality but her instant response, stating that she no longer drinks what she perceives to be 'poor quality wines', again suggested that the absence of quality is easier to assess than its existence.

It may be worth adding that within the ME reference group there often seemed to be particular difficulties in conceptualising quality. Both ME focus groups, when asked directly about their personal perspective on quality, showed a tendency to lapse into 'this is what the consumer thinks'. This avoidance technique suggested an unwillingness to grapple with the issue. What follows comes from a ME focus group which had been asked explicitly about their personal perspectives, rather than consumer perceptions:

SJC: Murray you talked about quality. What do you all think that wine quality is?

Murray: Looking at the fitness of the product. Let's face it the first part, is it drinkable?

SJC: What do you mean by 'is it drinkable?'

Murray: Well I guess is it enjoyable? And that's going back ... to your consumer question there as well. Because ... what is good for one person is not going to be enjoyable by another person. So that's where you've got to sort of work out does the consumer want a drier or fruitier style?

SJC: What do the rest of you think about quality?

Ryan: Well I think - yeah it's defined by every consumer. I think. So quality to somebody who's brand conscious may not have anything to do with the contents of the bottle. On the other hand people who are very discerning of wine quality may not care about brand image or awareness to that.

Sally: I think it's ... got obviously to live up to a consumer expectation.

Murray offered what may be a personal perspective on quality – that it is drinkability. But when pressed to be more specific, he resorted to the consumer's perspective, a view echoed by Ryan and Sally.

Interestingly this avoidance technique was less obviously displayed by PRs. They seemed happier with some of the more abstract areas of the discussion about quality. It may be that, because they focus regularly on making wine (a direct relationship with the product) rather than on having to sell it, the more abstract dimensions associated with the creative process are less alien to them.

## **1.2 The ambiguity of quality**

### ***1.2.1 When quality is irrelevant.***

For a few informants the concept of quality in wine was irrelevant. This was particularly apparent among those who took a subjective view of the nature of quality ('good wine is just what I enjoy') or for those who – like Nettie above – viewed wine quality as a foreign language which they cannot speak. Thus in a focus group, Cleo, who has already been seen to express some confusion about the nature of quality, added:

Cleo (SC, medium-involvement): I don't really buy a wine for quality. I buy it just for me liking it.

Alec (SC, medium-involvement): I think quality's completely personal.

Cleo: Quality is just a word that doesn't come into it for me.

This tended to be a perspective of low and medium-involvement informants. In one case, however, a high-involvement informant, who even admitted to having some of the ‘language’, still found the idea of quality an irrelevance. Frances, in the following extract, is a consumer married to a wine professional:

Frances (UC, medium-involvement): For me there's no point in making up my mind whether it's a good wine<sup>2</sup> or not. The only thing that's important to me is - do I want to drink it?

SJC: If ... [your husband] says 'look this is really good, this is excellent quality?'

Frances (UC): Yeah, I think I have an understanding [of] what he means. It's well made, it's balanced, it's got all the bits right. But it doesn't really mean that I'm going to enjoy drinking it. I may do - I may like it but it doesn't necessarily follow and I don't expect that it will necessarily follow.

Frances enjoys wine and has developed some knowledge of it. She has learned some wine language – but still asserts that ultimately it is what she enjoys that counts, not what may be well made or in balance.

### ***1.2.2 Quality as a negative concept***

For a few consumers the concept of wine quality may actually have negative connotations. The following is from a BC focus group:

SJC: What does everyone else think quality is about?

Florence (low-involvement): I think a lot of the time it's snob value.

Ben (low-involvement): [nods assent].

Damian (medium-involvement): I agree.

Ben: To me it's not much more than the money that you pay for it and I don't pay too much attention. I'm quite happy with the better cask wines myself.

Florence: I drink flagon wine.

The ‘anti-snob’ theme recurred regularly in this focus group. Ben and Florence both showed very low-involvement levels – Damian was a medium-involvement consumer, but seemed to restrain some of his enthusiasm for wine in order to ensure

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Good wine’ was regularly used by informants when talking about quality. As it is a marker of qualitative evaluation it is treated throughout this study as synonymous with ‘high quality wine’. This accords with philosophical practice, where the term is accepted as qualitatively evaluational (Dickie, 1997).

that he ‘belonged’ to the group. It is important to note the automatic assumption of a relationship between quality and price in this exchange (discussed in more detail later in chapter 8). Ben and Florence were adamant that high quality – as reflected by ‘high price’ - is at best irrelevant, at worst an unpleasant expression of status-seeking behaviour. Even this response was ambivalent, however. Florence elsewhere admitted to paying more for a bottle (thus obtaining higher quality) for special occasions and Ben talks about ‘better’ cask wine, thus implicitly making comparative judgments about the product. As part of the interpretive process this ambivalence and the overall uncertainty displayed by some informants requires caution about how some responses on the subject of quality are considered and assessed. What seems to be categoric information offered on occasions by informants may not necessarily have been as firmly believed as their apparent certainty suggested.

### ***1.2.3 Quality as a marketing construct***

A few informants expressed scepticism about the idea of quality, suggesting that it is just a construct of modern marketing techniques. This was best exemplified in the following exchange:

Natalya (SC, low-involvement, Western Australian): I think ... the idea of quality is a construct. It's been imposed on us by brand, or a location, or whatever.... [We say] ‘oh it's a nice bottle’, [or] ok, it's a bottle of W.A. wine - if we don't know what the wine tastes like. So we still buy what's ... imposed on us.

Natalya concluded that quality as a concept was something imposed on the consumer, and delivered semiotically, using cues such as bottle design, or origin (a ‘Western Australian wine’). This awareness of cues was, of course, an accurate reflection of consumer processes as recognised by theorists, but the way she expressed it (‘construct’, ‘imposed’) suggested a dislike of the process, a suggestion that someone else was using ‘quality’ to force her to buy particular wines. Other informants mirrored her scepticism, even if they did not express it so forcefully or directly.

A natural reaction would be to conclude that this view, that quality is just a construct of unknown marketing manipulators imposed on the unwitting public, is a low-involvement perspective. However, even some PRs articulated a similar, though

slightly more focused, scepticism. What follows is from a producer focus group.

The speakers are all winemakers:

Martin: It's the quality of your brand really. The quality of your brand and the history of your brand. Some people have smart packages and some people don't. Again it's open to interpretation but if you've got 30 or 40 years of history generally you can command a lot more for your wine. Whether it's worth that or not.

Bill: Yeah, and it doesn't really matter what it's like if you've got 30 or 40 successful years behind you. It could be anything. I mean people ... don't care.

...

Martin: Goes back to what you said about the Bordelaise. How are they getting away with that? There's people out there want to buy it so the market's supply and demand [reflects that].

Martin felt that brand, and especially brand history, can inflate the reputation of the wine beyond its intrinsic worth. Producers of Bordeaux wines (with a history of many centuries behind them) have particularly benefited from this by hyping their wine to the point where perceived quality may bear no relation to what is in the bottle. The irony of – or perhaps the reason for – his comments is that Martin himself has worked in Bordeaux, and has a reputation in Australia for producing wines which stylistically lean towards those produced by the Bordelaise.

### **1.3 The immediate relevance of quality**

As noted earlier, informants entered interviews and focus groups without knowing what the precise subject matter of the discussion (the nature of wine quality) would be. Additionally the topic was not instantly raised with them – rather their motivation and purchasing behaviour<sup>3</sup> were discussed. The intention of this was to see if any would raise the issue of quality voluntarily.

Only a few informants volunteered that they sought out 'quality' wines when making a consumption choice, although a few others talked about 'good' wines. Two interesting points result. The first is that invariably when the concept of quality was raised initially by the informants it was the moderate or high-level involvement informants who brought it up. (Two of them were BCs, but BCs who had displayed

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<sup>3</sup> Or, in the case of professionals, their goals in producing or marketing wines.



comparatively high involvement levels). This suggests that quality and ‘good wine’ as concepts tended not to be ‘top of the mind’ for very low-involvement consumers. That does not mean that quality is unimportant to them – as subsequent discussion will show – but that unlike, say ‘taste’ it is not what they think about most immediately in the process of buying and consuming.

The second point to make about this is that where quality was mentioned voluntarily it was often in conjunction with price (or in one instance value). This did not apply for the one PR who raised the topic of quality of her own accord, but did apply both to consumers and MEs when spontaneously discussing quality. Thus, for instance:

Robert (BC, medium-involvement): We buy cask wine for drinking round the house. We convinced the wife we can push up to premium cask wines now because ... she's agreed with me at last that drinking the cheap stuff is not worth the effort. Lack of flavours. Drink less and better quality. But I tend to buy from about the \$10 bracket range below \$5 is not worth [it, I] don't waste my money on [it].

Robert was trading up the quality level of what he drinks, which he perceives has an instant connection with price (the relationship with price is critical and will be dealt with in detail later). This extract is also revealing for another issue raised. Quality, as it is understood, does not have to be what the industry determines as ‘super-premium’ or ‘icon’ (Geene et al., 1999). As noted above by Robert it may just be a better brand of cask wine. Additionally, this extract shows how quality may have to be negotiated. Robert had to persuade his wife that they needed to buy ‘better’ casks in order to gain better flavour.

#### **1.4 The continuum of wine quality**

It was a common observation of informants that positive quality, when it existed, could be either moderate or high.

Damian (BC, moderate involvement): I feel with wine you've got the two regions. The very, very bottom is really bad - and the very, very top is very good. But in between Australian wines are absolutely fantastic. You can get a superb bottle for \$18 and you can get the same sort of ... quality for \$30.... [In] that medium region, you don't need to pay great money to have great wines.

Damian described three levels: wine with very low quality, wine with moderate quality (and good value) and the very top level. Some, however, saw the grading of quality as a more finely-nuanced process. In the following extract the speaker was in a focus group talking about one of the wines which had just been tasted:

Louis (SC, low-involvement): But isn't quality a continuum anyway?

Louis sees beyond a simple scale of 'low quality/moderate quality/ high quality' to a much more carefully graded continuum. For the most highly involved, the gradations may be quite finely nuanced, and a marking system – which operates as a continuum - may be used to help define those nuances:

Tim (ME): I'm looking for something special, I've marked one wine 19, that's the highest ever.

SJC: What was the wine?

Tim: It was a Chateau Latour '96 just a few months ago. It was just a knockout.

Tim uses the standard Australian system for marking wines out of 20, where 18½ gains a wine a gold medal, and 19 is perceived to be a very good wine indeed.

The idea of gradations of quality was raised – or at least assumed - by a number of professionals. However for some of them quality appeared, perhaps, to operate both dichotomously and on a continuum. There was a sense that there is a split between 'commercial wines' (probably of reasonable quality, but all grouped as a class) and then the more interesting, or more expensive wines (labelled in the following extract as 'super-premium'). This is from a PR focus group. All the speakers are winemakers, except for Vince, who is a viticultural manager:

Vince (PR, viticulturist): I think there's different levels of wine making. I mean if you're talking [about] the super, super premium end ... it's more vineyard focused whereas I guess commercial wine...

Clive: ...I think commercial wine's more dollar focused.

Melissa: Absolutely.

Bill: We all have to be aware of the commercial realities of the wine styles that we're trying to make. Bottom line, bottom line.

All the speakers worked for moderate sized or large companies. They were all involved in making ultra-premium wine but all had been – or still were – responsible for more commercial volume wines. Thus they operate a split existence, for they

have to make ‘good quality’ cheap wines – and have to be actively involved in the promotion of those wines – but generally those bulk wines are not what they personally would chose to drink. It made sense for them to split wines into the commercial (drinkable and good value, but perhaps grouped at the same quality level) and the ultra-premium. Within this dichotomy it may be that gradations of quality exist, but there was nevertheless a sense amongst PR respondents that two distinct wine categories exist.

For a very few informants however, quality seemed to operate on an either/or basis. Wine either has no quality, or it has good quality. This view was unusual. It was held by a small number of informants across the different types of reference groups, but best expressed by a winemaker:

Melissa (PR): Something that might be lack of quality I would consider to be something faulty, something that's got a character that's totally unappealing to the majority of people. And I would say that that had a lack of quality. Now whether that be a shocking volatile factor or even a corked wine - that has a lack of quality. Because there's a majority of people who find something in it that they don't like. But high quality, that's totally subjective, once you get out of the lack of quality, everything is just a level of high quality, depending on your perception I think.

For Melissa, at this point, if a wine was faulty it had no quality. If it was made technically correctly, then it had high quality, but that quality could not be objectively graded as it was ‘totally subjective’.

## **2 Conceptualising wine quality**

Just as the academic perspective on the nature of quality varies, fluctuating between perceived and absolute, objective and relative, so wine consumers display different ideas about the character of wine quality itself. Critical is the subjective-objective dichotomy; of less importance, though still relevant, is the distinction between absolute and relative quality.

### **2.1 Subjective quality**

Many informants considered quality to be a subjective phenomenon, which equates primarily to their personal taste and is rooted in individual experience.

Dan (BC, low involvement): If you sum up quality for me, it's just whether I like it or not, it's just taste. I don't care how big a reputation it has but if I like it then I don't care.

A similar response was given repeatedly. It was not just an approach employed by low-involvement informants, but was also expressed articulately by at least one winemaker in the context of a discussion on quality.

Wendy: We went to Italy for a few days and we were with a friend of mine - he was a Serbian. I was trying this wine and I said 'it smells like ... wild fennel'. And he said 'that's it, that's just too much'. I'd pushed him right over the limit. Anyway, it was not quite fennel it was just a little bit wild. He just wouldn't have a bar of it. The next day I pulled up some wild fennel from the path as we walked along and showed him. But he was 'wild fennel. Are you out of your mind?' But, yeah, I saw wild fennel in it - that's why I mean it can only be subjective.

This extract pays particular attention to the nuances of flavour in a wine (and – given the context - by extension may be relating 'taste' directly to quality). It initially seems that Wendy's friend may have been objecting to the precision with which she was dissecting the aromatic profile of the wine, although the last sentence suggests that Wendy's interpretation was more that he just did not see the same characters in the wine as her – and that is why for her the assessment of quality was so personal.

Nevertheless, although subjectivity was offered as a perspective across the range of informants, there was a tendency for the view to be expressed more by low-involvement drinkers than those with higher levels of involvement. Low-involvement drinkers regularly talked about personal taste, and 'the eye of the beholder' when asked to discuss the nature of quality. Some high involvement drinkers – like Wendy – also took that stance, but less commonly.

A subset of the subjectivist approach was suggested by some wine professionals. For these informants the idea of quality was personal, but it was personal not to them but to others, the consumers. Thus the public decide what quality is. So, in a PR focus group:

Clive: I guess in that sense quality is again measuring the goodness of the wine.

Martin: But who measures it?

Clive: The consumer.

This view that ‘quality is defined by the consumer’ was articulated by a few other professionals, including other winemakers and MEs.

For some the subjectivist perspective (personal taste) shades into a relative perspective on quality (discussed in section 2.3). There seemed to be fairly close links between these two conceptual perspectives on quality.

## **2.2 Objective quality**

In contrast to the subjective view of wine quality, there were a number of informants who held an explicitly objective perspective. In this instance quality may be described as inhering in the product itself, rather than in the personal response to it. Thus in the following extract Simon was asked whether or not quality is discrete to wine, rather than centred in the consumer:

Simon (UC, high-involvement): I think the quality's inherent, [I] really do. There may be styles you don't like - but you can tell the difference between good quality and poor quality in something you don't like. And I think that's fairly easy to do. You know I'm not a great fan of rosés but had quite a few in France. One chap was very proud of this rosé he made.... It was nice ... very good fruit in it. Good quality wine.

Others also mirrored Simon's objectivist perspective. Martha, who had already defined quality as ‘excellence’, was asked if fluctuations in the taste of wine were due to variable quality in the product or changes in her perception:

SJC: So you think the quality is inherent in the wine whether or not you're able to pick it up?

Martha (ME): Absolutely, yes it stays there. I think you're just in a mood to taste or you're in an area where you can [taste effectively] ... My perception of the quality really changes according to where I'm at.

For many respondents the objective position was adopted distinct from a more subjective or relativist position (see section 2.3 below). Thus Martha distinguished what was actually in the glass from her situational ability to assess and enjoy it, and this view was shared by a number of informants.

Objective approaches to quality can be categorised in two ways. One is in the idea of production-based quality – that quality lies in the way the wine was made:

Leo (UC, high-involvement): It gets back to whether it's a well made wine ... Whatever price bracket it has to be a well made wine before you enjoy it

For others the quality is objective only as the wine is assessed in the glass. The external factors need have no bearing on it:

Norman (BC, low-involvement): I do find some more eminently drinkable than others. I suppose because I generally drink wine every day it just tends to be sort of run of the mill ... occasionally somebody will come to visit and leave a nice bottle of something behind. And I think 'I might have a treat tonight' and open that and have a taste of that one. And it is a fact you can say 'well this is a better wine there is something more to it, more body or something.'

These two ways of viewing objective quality mirror the extrinsic and the intrinsic dimensions of wine quality, and will be discussed in more detail subsequently in section 3.

For certain professionals the insistence on objective quality is critically important:

Umberto (ME): I do then start getting a bit picky if somebody says 'this is the best because I think it's the best wine'. I say 'well actually it isn't. You absolutely have the right to say "yes it's my preferred drink" but it may not be the best of its type. And you won't know that unless you do the type of stuff that I do on a regular basis, and you want to learn about that type of thing.'

Umberto tastes widely and regularly for his work, and that, he concluded, puts him in a position to judge wines objectively. Others are entitled to their preferences but they could not, he argued, by extension claim that their preferred wine is the highest quality. He does not express it overtly, but he needs to maintain this perspective. Were the alternative - that quality is purely individual – to gain widespread acceptance, then his career of tasting, evaluating and recommending wines would have no point.

This view that quality is objective relates closely to the idea that one can recognise high quality – even if it is not to one's personal taste. Thus:

SJC: Do you think there's a difference then between people saying 'the wine's good' and people enjoying it?

Richard: At a technical level yeah. This is the notion of wine show judging where I think 'this wine's fantastic and I'll give it a gold

medal but for God's sake don't give me lots of it to drink.' We're supposed to be able to do that.

SJC: We're supposed to be able to but do you think we can?

Richard: No very rarely, very rarely. We all think we can do it but I think a lot of people do struggle to separate the subjective from the objective.

SJC: Do you think you can do it sometimes?

Richard: Sometimes, absolutely sometimes. ... [but] when it came to something for which I had more of a fondness or an affinity - say riesling - my subjective point of view is probably much closer to the objective.

Richard expressed some uncertainty in his approach. He accepted that there is an element of objective quality in the appreciation of wine, and that at times he could exercise his critical faculties to engage with that. Nevertheless it is not a simple process and there is a gap between the objective and his subjective preference, which impedes his ability to evaluate the objective. Critically he thinks that objective quality exists, though it may be hard at times to apprehend it.

The objective view of quality tended to be held by higher involvement drinkers rather than low-involvement ones. Producers were quite likely to express a belief in absolute quality. There were exceptions however. In a comment after the formal interview had finished, Wendy (who, as we have already seen, adopted a more subjective approach) noted that most winemakers favour an objective view of quality because they want to believe that their wine is 'objectively' better than their rivals' wines are.

Nevertheless, some medium and low-involvement drinkers also tended towards an objectivist viewpoint. Where this happened they often separated their preference from any ability to discern quality. They may even have disclaimed any capacity to see quality, though they did not doubt its existence:

Cleo (SC, medium-involvement): If you were to ask me which is the best quality I really can't say, because I don't think I'm qualified to know what is the best quality wine.

Cleo accepts that some external, objective quality exists and that others are trained and qualified to judge it. However, she feels that she cannot assess quality so the concept has no relationship to her drinking behaviour, nor to her enjoyment of wine. At this point the objective concept of quality has an existence alongside personal

preference. It is this dualistic approach, uniting objective quality with personal inclination, which acts as a nexus between the objective and subjective approaches. The role of personal preference is therefore discussed next.

### ***2.2.1 The role of personal preference***

Connected to the subjective and objective conceptualisations of quality in wine is a perspective on personal preference. Most informants – including a number who initially conceptualised quality as a subjective process - distinguished their own personal taste in wine from what may or may not be high quality. The following comes from a focus group:

SJC: What it sounds to me as though you're saying is that quality is absolutely personal and subjective? In the end quality is about what I like.

Ellie (BC, medium-involvement): I think with wine it can be a bit of that ... Some people don't like wines that have lots of tannin in them. I don't mind it. Some people would say 'that's a bad wine' or a fault. Where I quite like it - I don't regard it as a fault.

Ellie stresses that personal taste – which varies from individual to individual – is crucial to quality. Yet later in the same focus group she distinguishes personal taste from quality:

Ellie: I think taste and quality are related but I think they're different concepts. I've had very well made, very expensive, lovely bottles of wine but they just weren't to my taste. But they were balanced, they were great quality, they were fantastic wines - but I personally didn't like them. And I've gone for a cheaper bottle on the table that I happened to enjoy and everyone else drank the really expensive one.

This distinction between personal taste and externally verifiable quality was made by informants from all reference groups and all levels of involvement. It was also often expressed by drinkers who adopted an objective or a relative view of quality. Thus, with wine, the common marketing wisdom that – within the parameters of price – consumers' quality judgments will always accord with their selection, seems questionable. Ellie will drink a cheaper bottle, which others may prefer not to drink (and which is therefore 'lower quality'), if she enjoys it more than a bottle which is both more expensive and preferred by her companions (thus 'higher quality'). It may be that this marks the distinction between quality and satisfaction. It has already



been noted that one can be dissatisfied with high quality or satisfied with low quality (Oliver, 1997).

The view about preference was most clearly expressed by wine professionals. What follows is two sections from a PR focus group, separated by a moderate period of time:

Roger: Well I suppose there are some subtle differences in who you're making it for. You know, some wines that you produce where you're aiming to really produce the best example of its style - or your interpretation of that style - in the world. And then there are other ones where you're in positions where you need to produce products where you're aiming to bring the maximum pleasure to the maximum number of people that you can. Where ... you have to produce large blends of wine that people are going to get into.

SJC: You make a distinction between the best possible of its type and maximum pleasure to maximum people?

Hal: We make two wines, one for us and one for them.

Then later, during a discussion about the wines that had been tasted, the participants were asked whether the wine they had selected as the most enjoyable was also the best quality wine:

SJC: Are you saying that your choice to drink is wine No. 4 but you think wine No. 1 is the highest quality?

Aaron: Absolutely - for what it is. I can appreciate everything everyone's said about it.

SJC: Do you think there could be situations where you can distinguish your preference from your evaluation of quality?

Hal: Yeah, definitely. Depends what you're in the mood for. Sauvignon Blanc's a good example. It's hard to find a good bottle of sauvignon blanc [laughter] ... I might say 'that's a very good wine, high quality, but my preference at this point in time is to drink [something else].' Yeah, that happens all the time ...

Gemma: An extreme example of that would be looking at an extremely good botrytised wine. How often do you really feel like diving into them? And ... perhaps it's a far better quality wine in the line up and you wouldn't go for it.

Maria: Or with me drinking 8% alcohol German rieslings which aren't necessarily fabulous quality but they're bloody lovely drinking. Because they're just so easy to drink.

...

Hal: The wine show system is probably the best example of that. Most of the judges detest the wine they give trophies and gold medals. Not most - [but] some of the judges will give a wine a gold medal even though they find them jammy and overoaked, or they hate the oak. So quality is a driving factor in a wine show sense, not necessarily preference - though it varies quite considerably among judges.

These two extended passages are important for a number of points raised in relation to professionals and preference. The participants reiterated the distinction between the apprehension of quality and one's preference – which is made almost universally by professionals. Critically they also showed how winemakers, as both creators and judges of an aesthetic product split their own liking from popular taste. They reiterated that they make 'two wines'; those for the mass, and those they would choose to drink themselves. And when they judge wines they can divorce their own preference from an assessment of the 'objective' quality of the wine – even if they clearly dislike the wine's style. Maria, also, chooses to drink wines which are 'lovely' but possibly of moderate quality; they do not match the quality parameters which she has learnt, but – perhaps – their delicacy and clarity of flavour delight her.

Only one professional expressed a dissenting view. Wendy (a thoughtful and highly respected winemaker) was quoted earlier as tending to hold a subjectivist concept of quality. She refused to separate her preference from her decisions as a show judge:

Wendy: I've never given a gold medal to a wine that ... I don't like, that I wouldn't want to drink.

For professionals that perspective, however, was exceptional rather than the rule.

For many drinkers who distinguished quality from preference this differentiation seemed to be a means of resolving the apparent paradox of personal taste and belief in the objective nature of quality. Preference thus seemed to be a means of linking a personal, subjective approach to the concept of wine quality with a more objective viewpoint. Thus the idea is that quality is 'out there' and is verifiable independently of what they like to drink. Consequently it allows both perspectives – objective quality and personal taste - to be maintained contemporaneously despite their initial apparent contradiction. In the case of high-involvement drinkers that stance was predicated on an ability to evaluate quality, but then to separate that evaluation from their own preference. For low-involvement

consumers the split was often between the certainty of what they liked, alongside an acceptance that 'objective' quality existed despite their inability to recognise, evaluate, or articulate it. Cleo has already been quoted claiming that she does not think she is qualified to judge the quality in wine. She continued:

Cleo (SC, medium-involvement): I only know what I like ... my taste doesn't seem to coincide with any of the judges. Consequently I'm no judge of quality wine.

She articulates a kind of bafflement by the idea of quality. She accepts that it exists, and that it can be evaluated, but she has no comprehension of it – merely of her personal preference. This is very different from Hal or Gemma's assertion, above, that they can identify good wine even though they may choose not to drink it at any time. Cleo's declaration of inability was also expressed by other low and medium-involvement consumers.

For a number of the more knowledgeable drinkers the issue of preference often focused during interviews on specific grape varieties. Many high-involvement informants would nominate one grape variety which they did not particularly like. Often that variety was sauvignon blanc – though not invariably:

Nick (PR): Probably the only one I can think of [that I don't like] is pinot gris ... but that's again a personal taste. But overall there's not many styles of wines that I at least can appreciate even if I don't particularly like the wine.

...

SJC: Can you conceive of the idea that there can be really good quality pinot gris even if you say 'I don't want to drink that'?

Nick: Oh absolutely. Yeah, it can have all the characters of pinot gris it should show ... that floral sort of flabby character to it. Invariably if I'm tasting the wines blind I'll say, 'well that's pinot gris. Don't like it. Nice wine but I don't like it.'

The distinction Nick was making is important, and was regularly repeated by consumers as well as professionals. Quality may be objectively high or low, but the preference for specific flavours is considered personal and subjective. For the trained winemaker there is an expectation. Objective quality can be assessed when tasting, even though they will drink entirely according to their subjective preference,

and that preference may lead them to drink wines of lower 'objective' quality than others which are available.

### **2.3 Relative quality**

The idea of relative quality suggests that quality only exists in relation to other factors, and indeed that quality varies according to those factors. This perspective operates in opposition to the absolute position, that quality is a fixed and unchanging external benchmark. The relativist viewpoint tended to be a commonly held opinion, although without the density of responses associated with either the objective or subjective attitudes. However, it is necessary to note the similarity in the positions of those who held that quality is subjective (purely personal) with those who argue that it fluctuates according to circumstance; both operate very much from the perceived quality perspective, where quality is based on an individual's personal assessment. The key factors which informants suggested as determinants of relative quality were price, fashionability, the experience and cultural background of the drinker and the consumption situation.

**Price:** Inevitably if quality is perceived to be relative, then it must be relative to something. The most widely perceived form of relativity expressed was that of quality to price. Thus, in a focus group discussion about quality in both wine and food, George starts by talking about quality generally as an abstraction, before relating it specifically to wine:

George (BC, low-involvement): There's three things that come down to it. And this is my personal opinion. One is taste, the other is convenience and the other is price. Not in priority but in that order from a food point of view. From a wine point I don't think convenience comes into it which boils down to ... taste and price.

This price relativity was perceived to be significant by both consumers and professionals and for informants of every involvement level. Nevertheless, professional informants were more likely to make a distinction between the role of relative quality for themselves and consumers:

Jill (PR): From a winemaker's point of view perception of quality is in terms of what that wine can give you - and the enjoyment and the

satisfaction and the longevity of that wine. Both in terms of in your mouth at that time - and then in your cellar to enjoy years down the track. But then, say, [from] a consumer's point of view quality can sometimes mean a dollar figure - like a \$70 bottle of wine versus a \$15 bottle of wine. They might perceive the \$70 as having quality. In actual fact it could be quite around the other way in terms of what you're getting for the money that you've spent.

Jill tends to see wine quality in absolute terms for her and her colleagues (both the immediate pleasure given, and the potential for enhanced pleasure in the future). However, she also sees quality operating in relative terms for consumers, perhaps not crediting consumers with her own ability to make objective judgments about the wine.

There is a sense, in analysing the data offered by consumers, that the price-quality relationship and the associated concept of relative quality is most important for either the most involved or the least involved. Only a couple of medium-involvement consumers referred to it, but a number of BCs and UCs did (the latter discussing the idea with some detail and great clarity). Two extracts illuminate this:

Norman (BC, low-involvement): When I drink something - say a chardonnay if I buy say a \$15 bottle ... and compare that with a \$5 Queen Adelaide or something - I'm aware that there is quite a difference. You know there is a tastable difference - but I don't know if there is \$10 worth of difference.

Charles (UC, high-involvement): Quality is relative ... I'll say it's relative because quality [exists] in terms of the winemaking techniques, if the wine is free of wine faults then it's a good wine. But I'll judge quality generally according to price. How much I'm paying. If I'm paying \$50 per bottle of wine I'm expecting a very good wine that's going to be complex, that's going to have the ability to cellar for at least the medium to long term. And that is going to be enjoyable.

Both of these informants saw quality in relationship to price. For Norman there was a sense that 'over a certain price it isn't worth paying any extra for marginal differences.' This tended to be explicitly or implicitly suggested by a number of low involvement consumers. For Charles it was slightly different. 'I don't mind paying extra - but I must get extra sensory reward for the additional expenditure'. This suggestion that price relativity is more important at either end of the involvement continuum tends to bear out previous research suggesting a U-shaped curve on the importance of price to consumers at various involvement levels (Cordell, 1997;

Graeff, 1997). This form of relative quality shows a close relationship to concepts of value (which will be discussed in chapter 8).

***Fashion:*** Beyond the price to quality relationship, quality may also be seen to be relative to current fashions:

Ernest (ME): I find it quite amusing ... the way the trade talks and thinks about sauvignon blanc in Australia. You'd get stoned if you came out as a big fan of herbaceous, Marlborough sauvignon blanc.... It's partly fashion - but we're influenced by [it] for sure.

Ernest reflected an anecdotally common perspective in the wine industry that sauvignon blanc is not a high quality or interesting grape variety – and that some very intense examples of it (such as those from Marlborough in New Zealand) are especially unacceptable. Yet he put that down to the changing tastes of wine drinkers – in this case the sub-group of wine professionals who drink. This concept of trends or fads in taste was noted by a few informants – but all of them professionals or high-involvement consumers, suggesting that it was those with the interest to track changes in consumption patterns over time who registered this form of relative quality.

***Cultural background:*** For some informants quality perception was relative to one's knowledge, experience or acclimatisation. So one winemaker, when asked about the nature of quality during a focus group, suggested the following:

Roger: Depends a bit on the culture of the market I suppose ... [one can compare] people who are right into bright and fruity, sweet, Aussie, reds - and things like that - as opposed to the people who are into the really tart, slightly phenolic, German rieslings and things like that. It was real eye opener for me when living with some Austrian people for a while ... I got a case of Rhone reds and whites sent over and I thought they were great. And they really weren't into them. They didn't like the whites because they thought they were too soapy.

Gemma: Familiarity.

Roger: Yeah, they were accustomed to acid, and that's what they were used to and that's what they liked.

Roger notes the relative quality perception imbued by personal taste, and at the same time gives it a distinct cultural spin, resulting in this instance from a particular national taste in wine.

***Situation:*** Quality may also be relative to the consumer's situation of consumption. Thus:

Damian (BC, medium-involvement): You know it does depend on the occasion, the weather.

Briony (SC, medium-involvement): [It varies with] what you're drinking and what kind of mood you're in.

The weather, one's mood or the fact that one is at a barbecue rather than a formal dinner may be seen to affect the quality of wine – although situation was more often perceived to influence the process of wine evaluation rather than its intrinsic quality level. However, some informants, whilst acknowledging the importance of situation in the consumption process, nevertheless distinguished it from quality, and did not adopt a relativist position:

Don (ME): The appropriateness probably goes way beyond what I would deem quality. But the quality of the product, from my point of view, is something that I can separate from the situational match if you like. Yeah.

It is worth noting that where low-involvement consumers referred to relative quality it was generally in the context of price or situation. The other forms of relative quality – relating to fashion, culture and experience - appeared to be more relevant to the medium or high-involvement consumers. Again this was perhaps because they have an interest in thinking more widely about the product.

As a conclusion one can suggest that relative quality appears to operate at the intersection of quality and some, at least, of its correlates. So, for those drinkers who consider it to be relative, quality exists very much in relation to price, fashion or situation. These are factors which other, non-relativist drinkers (and some theorists) would claim are not components of quality itself, but exist in relationship to it.

## **2.4 Absolute quality**

A few informants considered that wine quality is externally fixed or absolute, though this was a much less commonly held view than the relativist position. The practical impact for most of these informants with an absolutist standpoint was that the quality of the wine exists irrespective of their ability to detect it.

SJC: What do you understand about quality in wine?

Waldemar (SC, medium-involvement): I probably will use two definitions. One is an absolute quality and this is something that you see in the Mount Maries and the Granges of this world - or Hill of Grace.

Quality in this instance was perceived to inhere in the wine, and to have no relationship to the drinker, nor to other external factors, and is unchanging whatever the situation of consumption. Waldemar, in this instant, equated this absolute quality to certain brands, which (though he did not mention it at this point) are both expensive and of high reputation. However, even Waldemar did not see absolute quality as the only means of establishing how good a wine is. He continued immediately:

I also see quality through a value for money prism, and I don't think that it is fair to compare a \$15 wine against \$40 wine. But in terms of value for money very often a \$15 wine offers you significantly more than a \$40 wine.

Waldemar thus took both an absolute and a conflicting relativist position. It was apparent that the absolute view of quality tended to be taken by a few medium- and high-involvement drinkers. Hardly any low-involvement consumers gave any indication that quality exists as a fixed point outside their consumption experience, other than in the context of personal preference.

## **2.5 Quality as an interactionist concept**

Despite the apparent certainty with which informants sometimes seemed to conceptualise quality many were reluctant to hold a single perspective – merely objective, or subjective, or absolute or relative. Umberto has been quoted earlier maintaining the objective nature of expert wine tasting, but later in his interview he commented:



Umberto (ME): I think that's the really important thing about professional tasting ... you try ... and just focus on the job in hand - which is to – as objectively as is possible, in such a highly subjective field as wine analysis - look for the best wines you can.

There is an acknowledgment that however objective one tries to be, there remains a subjective element to the process. Thus Umberto has shifted from a pure objectivist position to one which is more interactionist; the subjective and the objective both come into play. Similarly the winemaker Wendy has been quoted previously suggesting that the appreciation of quality is subjective. When asked, however, about the more formal ways of tasting wine such as wine judging, she responded:

Wendy (PR): I think that is objective - but there is no way you can argue absolutely objective. You can't. And I think also wine appreciation is very dependent on who is there because you can have the greatest bottle of wine and the greatest bottle of burgundy sitting with a lot bores.

Wendy argues that wine judging may have an objective element to it, but the evaluation of quality within consumption generally is partly subjective, partly relative (to the situation one is in) and partly objective. Great wine can be consumed in the midst of awful people, which will impact on its assessment. This maintains a number of apparently contradictory positions at once. This interactionist perspective tended to be held by high-involvement drinkers.

For a number of consumers as well this interaction between different concepts of quality was crucial:

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): It might be a good high quality wine out there in the general consensus - but for me, I wouldn't buy it, because it does have the oak. Quality does become a personal thing to a certain degree as well.

For Laura – who had previously articulated an 'objectivist' concept of quality the objective factor in this instance (the use of oak) could be unpleasant to one's personal taste, even though most consumers might respond positively to it. This viewpoint was echoed by other informants in other contexts. It was often even quantified, so that 'objective' quality comprised a specific proportion of total quality:

SJC: Do you all agree with Clive and Melissa that ultimately quality is subjective?

Vince: [Nods assent. Others ponder and seem undecided].

Clive: [There is] 70% that isn't [subjective]. But then there's that little bit extra - the pinnacle, the ultimate, which I consider enough to make quality wine. I think 70% we'd all agree [on], but then the final determinant of quality for each for us will probably end up on personal preferences.

Clive saw 70% of wine quality as objective. That element of quality is communicable to his colleagues and probably would be accepted by them. Then there is another part of quality which is not objective, and perhaps not justifiable to others. This part is the response based on personal taste, or perhaps on varying degrees of sensitivity to the components of wine. This very specific quantification of the 'objective' element of quality was repeated a few times (with a broadly similar figure offered) by consumers as well as professionals.

One interesting final point can be made – which has a bearing on the subjective/objective quality dichotomy. Some informants suggested that whilst wine quality itself is objective, its evaluation is a subjective process. The following extracts from an UC focus group are illuminating:

Mike (medium-involvement): If you talk about quality in wine, for me it would be complexity. A variety of tastes or feelings associated with the wine.

Leo (high-involvement): I think something balanced in the wine. I mean sometimes you can have too much acidity in it but which does not come true...

Oliver (medium-involvement): I'd go along with balance as well - but I tend to incline towards wine with elegance rather than power ... where you're getting all the nuances and complexities, not just the one big hit.

William (medium-involvement): Yeah I'm keen on balance, don't like wine that's been I think over fussed over by a chemist...

[later]

SJC: When you taste wine, or drink wine, how do you evaluate the quality?

Mike: I really like it.

Roz: Tastes nice.

Leo: I think it becomes a personal choice and I think we all taste the wine and some would like it and some of us don't perhaps not find it quite so palatable and others will really, really enjoy it. It's just one of those things that happens.

William: Lay back and enjoy it.

SJC: So the quality very much in the drinking is about your response to it and your enjoyment of it?

Leo: Yes.

Roz: Yes.

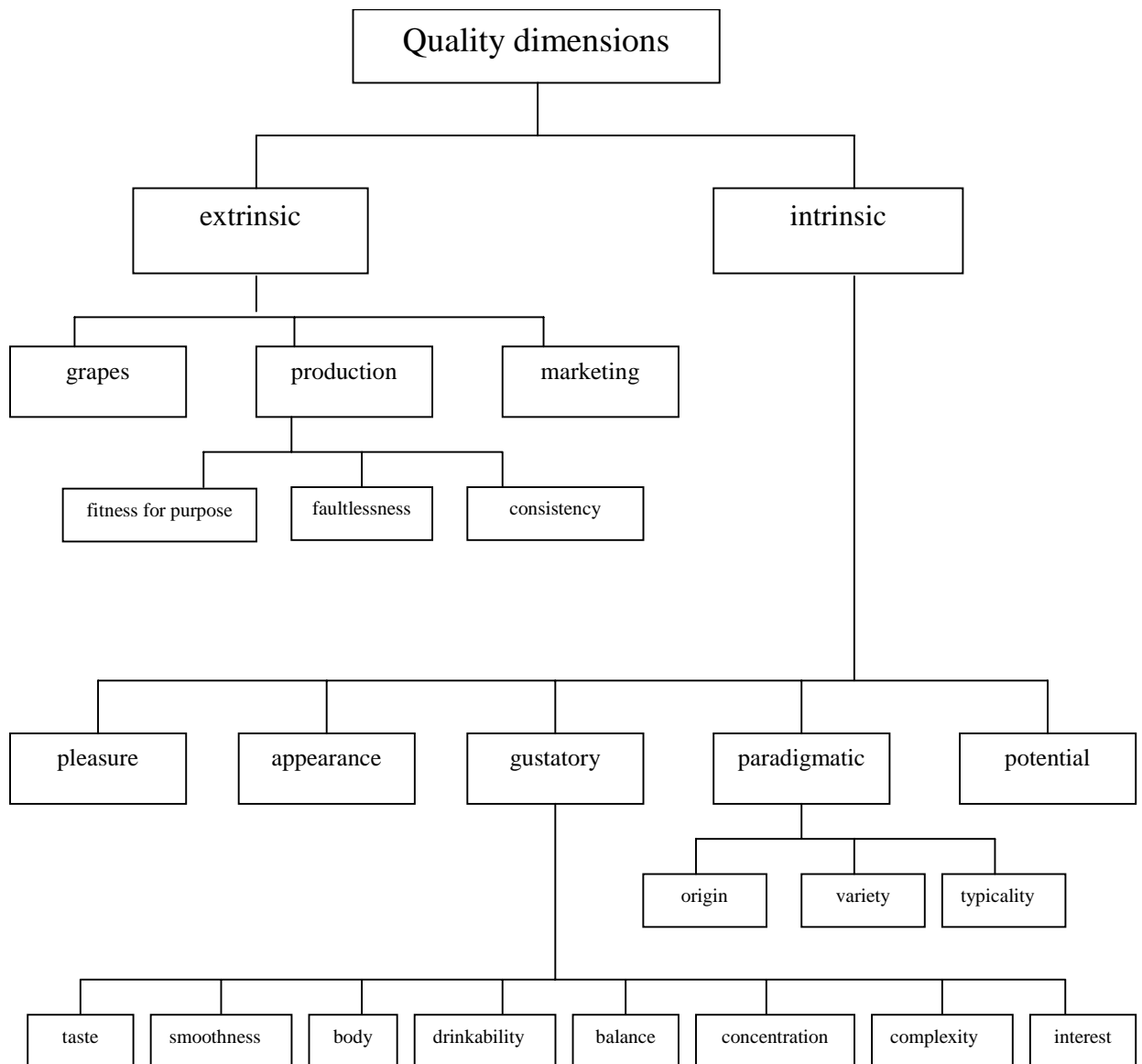
Mike: I would say.

The group, as a whole tended to give objective dimensions of quality which are verifiable organoleptically (and in some cases analytically) and susceptible to some level of agreement. These included balance, elegance and complexity. But when asked how they evaluate quality it became a personal process. It is what they sense and enjoy which is the issue rather than what they can prove. Leo summed it up as personal choice and individual enjoyment, and it seemed that the majority of the group accept his perspective. At this point the interaction of objective and subjective quality focuses on the objective characteristics of the wine and the inevitable role of personal taste in its assessment. This reflects Steenkamp's (1990) view that quality is both objective (in the product) and subjective (in the consumer).

### **3 The dimensions of wine quality**

As well as having a perspective on the context and conceptualisation of wine quality, drinkers also tended to see components or elements of quality. They would break quality down into smaller, possibly interactive, units which together comprise the core of wine quality. These are designated here as the dimensions of wine quality. As they are 'perceived' these dimensions of wine quality seem to be, by their very nature, specific to individual drinkers, although those with higher involvement levels - and perhaps some shared experience of wine consumption - tended to adopt similar terms. As a result of this personal specificity, the number of quality dimensions raised was quite large – over 38 words, phrases or concepts were used by informants to express wine quality dimensions. Nevertheless, it was clear that a number of these, although verbalised in different forms, often have a similar meaning, so that the overall number could be reduced by consolidation. It also became clear that these quality dimensions are of two categories. One category comprises the extrinsic dimensions of quality, relating to factors beyond the wine in the glass. Most typically these were production methods (including both grape quality and wine making methods), but they also included marketing-related issues.

The other – larger – category relates solely to what is in the glass, that which is experienced when the wine is consumed, i.e., the intrinsic quality dimensions. These broad categories of quality dimensions can then be broken down further to individual dimensions and in some cases to sub-dimensions. For ease of understanding a visual outline of this is contained at figure 7.1.



**Figure 7.1 – The dimensions of wine quality**

For clarity it is also necessary to note that there is a relationship between some of the quality dimensions offered by consumers and cues to quality. Thus, for

instance, one consumer was clear that the appearance of wine was one dimension of its quality – and gave reasons for that perspective – whereas other informants generally saw the appearance of a wine as merely a cue to potential quality. It is also important to note that this classification – of extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions, which may then be broken down into sub-dimensions, is an etic categorisation of this research process. Drinkers rarely, if ever, use the term ‘dimension’ to describe an aspect of quality, and they would regularly mix extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions, or give greater weight to sub-dimensions than to the overall dimension within which it has been placed by this analysis.

### **3.1 Extrinsic dimensions of quality**

#### **3.1.1 Grapes**

It was often observed that wine quality has a direct link with the quality of the raw materials. Thus the grapes that are used to make the wine, and by extension the methods which are used to grow those grapes, have a critical relationship with what will finally be drunk. This appeared to be of equal weight to the idea that quality is a product of what the winemaker does (discussed in section 3.1.2 below). Thus, for instance, one informant considered quality occurred:

Karen (SC, medium-involvement): [When] they've selected grapes ... with a certain standard and quality to make that wine. If it's one of those botrytised wines, made with mouldy grapes, that they have ensured that they've got the right mouldy grapes. Not just any mouldy grapes, but production quality.

Other, more knowledgeable, consumers were more specific:

Andrew (UC, high involvement): One thing ... which we must address is the fact that viticulture depends on whether they're dry grown [or] irrigated. [If] they start with canopies, what canopies they're using - and also the region; whether you're in a cool climate, warm or all of that. And again, to the tonnage per hectare. Because those vineyards that are putting the smaller tonnage per hectare are producing a far better wine as opposed to...

Patricia (UC, high involvement): ...Quality to quantity...

Andrew: ...As opposed to some of - especially - the Riverland.

Andrew notes the impact of irrigation (important for yield levels, which in turn have an impact on potential quality), the management of the vine's canopy, which affects

ripeness, climate and yield itself. This is a knowledgeable assessment by a consumer – and he ends with an implied comparison between grapes produced by the viticulturist who pays attention to those things and typical fruit from the Riverland in South Australia, where high yields produce much of the country's bulk wine – a product which he implies is not high quality.

Winemakers regularly articulated the view that wine quality depends on grape quality – although interestingly this perspective was not expressed in this context by any of the informants who were viticulturists. It may be that they were reluctant to claim undue responsibility for final quality when so many subsequent production processes were also involved. This view about grape quality was also rarely expressed by low-involvement consumers – possibly due to an ignorance about the processes of wine production. Where consumers considered viticultural quality important it was generally a view of the more well-informed, as expressed by Andrew above.

### **3.1.2 *Wine making issues***

For many drinkers it appears to be important that wine is made correctly, and this prerequisite may be deemed to be a component of the quality of the wine. This 'technical correctness' can be expressed in two ways which are related to each other, but with each also giving a different slant on how drinkers view the relationship of wine production to wine quality. These two approaches can be seen as the positive fitness for purpose and the negative 'absence of faults'. Additionally the consistency of wine from bottle to bottle was relevant for a few informants. These three concepts can be seen as sub-dimensions of wine production as an element of quality.

***Fitness for purpose:*** For some informants, technical correctness is expressed positively; wine must be made to be drinkable:

SJC: If one talks about quality in wine, what do you think the term quality means?

Diana (SC, medium-involvement): [long pause] How the wine's made I guess. Quality of the grapes that are used - the process that they've used to make the wine.

This was again more precisely detailed – as fitness for purpose - by a winemaker:

Richard: Wine quality? Well you can go down the quality management ISO9002 type definition of fitness for purpose. And I have some sympathy with that definition. An example - a strict definition of a quality guru was someone who wants a cask of wine to taste like the last one and not be oxidised, not be tainted, not be anything. Their expectation is 'for x dollars I get this'. And if it fulfils it exactly how they want, that is perfect quality for them. That's the fitness for purpose type of argument. They'd be very disappointed with a \$50 bottle of chardonnay which is oaky and aggressive.

Richard suggests that a winemaker must ensure that a wine is consistent, meets expectations and is 'fit for its purpose'. Note however that none of the informants who adopted the 'fit for its purpose' perspective volunteered precisely what that purpose actually was.

***Faultlessness:*** The alternative way of linking the technical correctness concept to quality was in the negative. Rather than being fit for a purpose a wine should have an absence of faults. In the following extract Ellie had been asked about the nature of quality:

Ellie (BC, medium-involvement): I hate buying wine that's gone off or it's oxidised or you can get really bad colours. I don't like an awful lot of sediment because it's a pain to try and get rid of.

For a number of informants who raised technical correctness as an issue, this approach often functioned almost as a *sine qua non* for other dimensions of quality – rather than a core dimension itself. Thus true engagement with quality lay in other often intrinsic dimensions, but that engagement could not occur unless the prerequisite of a well-made wine had been fulfilled. So, in the following extract, Charles has already analysed quality in terms of intrinsic dimensions:

SJC: So you could summarise quality in those three aspects, complexity, ageworthiness and pleasure?

Charles (UC, high-involvement): Yeah - assuming a fundamental correctness in winemaking techniques. [If] there's no winemaking faults.

The key to quality for Charles is complexity, a perception of pleasure, and the ability for a wine to age. But for any of these to be effective presupposes that the wine is correctly made and fault-free in the first place. This perspective links logically to the point noted earlier that some informants find it easier to conceive of quality as an

absence of negative factors, rather than being precise about the positives they look for.

It is noteworthy that whereas low-involvement drinkers rarely if ever made the link between grape quality and wine quality, they were much more likely to consider winemaking issues as relevant. To this extent they probably tended to see wine as a manufactured product (i.e. made by someone in the way that bread or cheese are) whereas higher involvement drinkers – and most professionals – placed equal emphasis on the notion of ‘terroir’, that wine is a direct reflection of the environment in which it is grown, as interpreted by the grapes.

**Consistency:** One specific area in which quality and wine production were linked was in consistency, although the overall perspective on this was ambivalent. For a number of consumers it was important that wine is consistent – that it tastes the same from one bottle to the next. This focus very much reflects the current quality management approach to production. One BC focus group was asked what determines a quality wine. Two low-involvement participants responded as follows:

George: I'd have to say consistent. Consistent taste, consistent look and consistent ... if you buy another bottle...

Adam: ...They taste exactly the same.

George: It should taste the same without a bit of variation.

Almost invariably when the idea of consistency as a dimension of quality was raised, it was low-involvement consumers who considered it important. Two PRs raised the issue, although this was in the context of the bulk or cheap wine that they made and when referring to their customers' perceptions of quality rather than their own perspective. One UC also considered consistency important, but he had lived in Japan and openly acknowledged that he had adopted that nation's focus on guaranteeing product quality. For most high involvement drinkers consistency was not seen as an issue, while for some the lack of consistency, at least in the form of vintage variation, had a positive impact on the dimensions of quality. (This is discussed further in section 3.2.3 below on 'interest').

Although it was generally acknowledged that wines should be technically acceptable a few drinkers, within all reference groups, expressed concern about what



they perceived to be the formulaic approach to wine making. This was best expressed by one of the winemakers:

Nick (PR, owner of a boutique winery): I think Australia probably suffers a lot from a bit of recipe winemaking. And I think it's very easy to fall into a trap of making a stock-standard wine. Although as I was saying in ... 2000 we made a very white-Bordeaux style sauvignon blanc/semillon. [A] very difficult wine to sell, so we're probably not going to be making another one of those ... It's a matter of balance I suppose.

[later]

And trying to keep that wine in balance and not just having a set recipe year in year out. 'The cabernet always gets 70% new oak,' you know - 'the the shiraz always get 50%'.

Nick recoils – at least as a winemaker – from the idea that wine is merely a result of a production recipe. Yet even so he reveals an element of ambivalence. His dislike as a winemaker of ‘recipe wines’ potentially conflicts with his perspective as a businessman who has to sell wine.

A few informants – all PRs – took the opposition to ‘stock-standard wines’ further, and expressed the opinion that occasional lapses in the technical correctness of the wine could add interest and thus paradoxically raise quality. Thus, in the discussion about the wines tasted in a focus group, Hal has already expressed a preference for the red wine:

Hal: I go for wines that interest me. I mean I don't think it's particularly fabulous but...

Roger: Not a classic is it? But a drink. It's got some nice, chewy tannins about it that I like. I don't mind that sort of stalkiness about it - if it is stalk derived. Yeah, it's not the most complex, it doesn't have the greatest length in the world but I don't mind it.

[shortly after]

Roger: You're always looking for something interesting. There's nothing worse than a boring wine. Rather have a glass of decent beer than a boring wine.

Roger is cautious about the ‘absolute’ quality of the wine. Given that its provenance and reputation was unknown at the time of tasting, he was probably hedging his judgment somewhat to avoid any appearance of poor tasting skills when the wines were subsequently revealed. The wine – as Hal and Roger describe it – is less than technically perfect. Its tannins may be partially stalk derived and thus a bit ‘green’

or bitter. Together, however, they reach the conclusion that despite or because of this the wine does have some interest, and implicitly, some quality. Indeed, Hal subsequently explicitly nominated it as the highest quality wine of the four which they tasted.

In some instances when faced with the conceptual difficulty of analysing quality the immediate response of low-involvement drinkers was to fall back on production issues. Thus;

SJC: If I talk about quality with wine what do you think that means?

David (BC, low-involvement): I suppose that'd have to be the process it went through to reach the bottle.

It became clear subsequently that for David that statement summarised the totality of quality for him. It was a function of production processes and nothing else. Whatever he tasted intrinsically in the glass had no correspondence to quality (even though it may result from those production processes). He refused to accept that there could be any organoleptic apprehension of quality.

However, for other informants the focus on technical correctness in the production of wine did allow some resolution of the objective/subjective dichotomy around the nature of quality. Grape quality, faultlessness, or fitness for purpose, are externally verifiable dimensions, giving a sense of objectivity, but beyond that quality becomes a matter of personal taste. This recognition of both extrinsic and intrinsic quality dimensions mirrors the interactionist concept of quality and was noted by some informants, both consumer and professional:

SJC: You're suggesting quality is absolutely a personal subjective view?

Bella (BC, low-involvement): Well I think you can probably say that 70/80% [is] things like the harvest, the grape, the time of year, region, - you can get that right. And you can probably speak generally for most people and say 'most of you will like this wine.' But then when it comes down to it - are you a white or red person? Do you like sweet or dry? Is it something you can drink glass after glass of or do you stop at one and think 'I've had enough'?

For Bella part of quality involves the technical – that which is done in the vineyard and the winery, which involves objective input and is scientifically controlled and verifiable. Some of it is quasi-objective and operates around the level of consensus.

Part comes down, at a very basic level, to personal taste. Ultimately for Bella, therefore, quality operates at the interaction of the two concepts, the objective and the subjective.

### 3.1.3 *Marketing factors*

Marketing and marketing-related issues (such as cues, satisfaction and value) tended to be perceived as correlates of quality – rather than a dimension of it *per se*. However, on occasions informants did actually include some of these factors as components of quality, rather than merely correlates. This view that marketing is an essential part of wine quality focused on the idea of a bundle of specific benefits offered by the product. As will be seen, this seemed to have a symbolic focus, dealing with the informant's relationship with other people. Thus some informants talked about a wine as a 'package', and quality fits into the overall schema of that package of benefits.

Roz (UC, medium-involvement): Quality is almost like the service that you get and that's the whole package. Which includes what you pay for wine and what your expectation of that wine is for that price.

Roz refers explicitly to price as a key component of that package. However, there tended to be other elements for other drinkers.

Nicolai (SC, medium-involvement): [There] should be good packaging as well. If I'm buying it for myself I don't care but if I'm going somewhere it should be [a] nice label as well.

SJC: Do you think that the packaging is an integral part of the wine's quality?

Nicolai: I believe so, yes... But again not for myself but if I'm going somewhere with a bottle of wine, it's not just a time to buy something [to] drink out of cask. But you are buying a present and people should feel that you spent a certain amount of money when they look at the bottle so the packaging should reflect that. But - as I'm saying - from my side it doesn't really matter.

For Nicolai the packaging conveys an image, and that image is directly linked to price. He did not use the term reputation, but others did, in the following instance explicitly in the context of a question about the nature of quality:

Philip (UC, high-involvement): There's probably a bit of what's on the label, Like having an awareness of what you paid for it, and its reputation.

Broadly, therefore, the idea of marketing elements as a dimension of wine quality seems to involve a triadic relationship: packaging (label particularly), price and reputation. Although they may not always express it so explicitly, it could be that wine drinkers relate their concept of quality to an overtly symbolic motivation for consumption, the image which they wish to project. This has a clear relationship to status and relationships with others, and the quotation from Nicolai makes this overt – the label or packaging is irrelevant for his domestic consumption, but when he is with others the label must look good and it must convey the ‘right’ message about how he sees them.

Two factors are worth mentioning in conjunction with this view of the marketing package as a dimension of quality. First, although all the references above came from consumers, wine professionals seem to be well aware of this factor and may also consider that it has a relationship to quality. Thus:

Aaron (PR): Quality is in the eye of the beholder. The eye of the general mass that is out there consuming your wine. [Quality is] quite an individual thing but as a whole ... they'd see the package and say ‘well I like it’ or ‘I don't.’

Quality, Aaron argues, is individual, and for the consumer may be bound up in how the wine looks – although at this point packaging as a marketing dimension of quality appears to shade into packaging as a cue.

The second related issue is that it tended to be medium- or high-involvement drinkers who were more likely to consider expressly the marketing package to be integral to the concept of quality. Nell, quoted above, was the exception (and in any event she referred to how ‘other people’ behave). The previous discussion on status (chapter 6, section 1.2.3) suggested that consumers at all involvement levels may make use of wine for status purposes, but it could be that, especially as they may hold ‘anti-snob’ attitudes, low-involvement drinkers are less willing to articulate this idea. To link their concept of quality to label, price and/or reputation so explicitly would open up the dangerous prospect that they themselves might use wine as a vehicle to establish position within their own social milieu.

### **3.2 Intrinsic dimensions of quality**

The intrinsic category of quality dimensions is a much larger group than the extrinsic, and with the exception of one interviewee all informants mentioned at least one intrinsic component as being part of their perception of wine quality. The intrinsic dimensions were also perceived to be more important overall than the extrinsic dimensions. Generally, informants volunteered two or more of these dimensions when asked about the nature of quality. Whereas some of the extrinsic dimensions of quality (especially the ‘package’ of price, reputation and packaging) are about symbolic consumption, the intrinsic dimensions seem to be more firmly rooted in the experiential paradigm. It is clear, however, that the intrinsic dimensions are intimately related to the motivations that prompt drinkers to consume wine in the first place (discussed further in section 3.3.2 below), and may ultimately also have symbolic significance.

As mentioned earlier, informants gave a wide array of definitions when asked to detail the nature of wine quality. However, on analysing what informants said it became possible to consolidate a number of the definitions, or at least group them together when some of them showed similar characteristics. Thus, for instance, ‘length of finish’ and ‘persistence of flavour’ were deemed to represent an identical sub-dimension. Personality, distinctiveness and interest, whilst not deemed identical, were felt to be sufficiently similar to be grouped together under ‘interest’. That still left 27 broad types of intrinsic dimension for analysis.

With such a variety of quality dimensions offered by drinkers it appeared difficult, at first, to detect any commonality between them. Nevertheless, closer analysis of informant responses suggested that five broad intrinsic dimensions exist. These comprise the immediately hedonic (pleasure and enjoyment); the visual (appearance); the gustatory (those related immediately to taste and its analysis, including aromatic components); the paradigmatic (where the quality of wine tasted was assessed on its ability to represent something extraneous to the glass); and the wine’s potential or ageworthiness. Two of these dimensions – the gustatory and the paradigmatic – also contain a number of sub-dimensions. The dimensions and sub-dimensions are considered in detail within the overall framework. In the same way that psychologists talk of terminal and instrumental values (typically Rokeach, 1968;

1973), so one can see the dimensions of quality as terminal or instrumental. Thus some dimensions may be an end state to be attained. Alternatively other dimensions can be seen as catalysts or indicators which mark out the process of the consumer's engagement with the quality of the product and are therefore instrumental. The first dimension – pleasure and enjoyment – tends to be terminal. The other four can be seen generally as instrumental dimensions.

### ***3.2.1 Pleasure and enjoyment***

For a number of informants, pleasure<sup>4</sup> was the primary dimension of quality offered. Thus, asked during a focus group about preferences for the wines sampled, Sue volunteered the following:

Sue (SC, medium-involvement): I'm inclined to think if I enjoy it ... I can get into the quality if I'm enjoying it.

Others were more expansive. One member of another focus group, asked about what their preferred wine did for each of them, volunteered the following:

Lesley (ME): Wine number four. It's ... just a lovely medium weight wine ... It's quite a delightful wine, it's got a huge amount of complexity, it's got a lot of flavour. It just does it for me. I could just sit and quaff this wine. It's a wine that's giving me lots of pleasure in my mouth.

This dimension of quality relies very much on an immediate, hedonic sensory response. Lesley - as a wine professional - could rationalise (cognitively) her sensory response more easily than Sue. However, she too showed that the response is primarily sensory, which she could then find 'objective', cognitive reasons to justify.

Pleasure was mentioned by members of all reference groups and informants of all involvement levels as one of the dimensions of quality. Nevertheless there was a sense that at higher involvement levels, and especially amongst male informants, it was a secondary response which often emerged after some probing. Female informants who were professionals or high involvement consumers were more likely than their male counterparts to volunteer pleasure as a dimension of quality and to be

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<sup>4</sup> The term pleasure is used throughout this and subsequent chapters to include enjoyment, fun and any related positive affective state.

more confident in their standpoint. On the issue of pleasure the genders diverged, with varying emphasis on the cognitive and the affective understanding of wine and of wine quality.

It is worth noting that there was a particularly close link between the notion of pleasure as a dimension of wine quality and the gustatory dimension of 'taste' (to be discussed in section 3.2.3 below). The following is a good example of this:

Ursula (BC, low-involvement): It's got a really nice taste, it's really smooth, smells nice ... It's a completely sensuous experience. If it's a really good wine that's what I feel. I suppose that's what wine is really - it's more of a sensuous thing ... It's nothing to do with price or label. To me it's ... you try it and you think 'gee this is lovely'.

For Ursula there is an immediate link between taste and pleasure, between the sensory and the affective. The wine is smooth, and tastes nice and that is her focus rather than thinking about the wine (which she expresses as 'price or label'). It is worth expanding this point generally to stress that almost invariably when informants mentioned pleasure as a component of quality they referred to it in tandem with some other dimension. Whilst the relationship between pleasure and taste was often important, many other dimensions - mainly gustatory but also occasionally extrinsic ones - were included. In terms of what informants were expressing, albeit unconsciously, one can suggest the following process. First, there is the immediate sensory impact of pleasure. This may then prompt a more cognitive analysis which in turn validates and confirms the initial, subjective pleasure. It provides more objective, verifiable criteria (for instance, smoothness, complexity or value) which are perceived to reinforce or enhance the initial sense of pleasure.

It is also important to point out that this dimension of wine quality was firmly subjective. Pleasure and enjoyment from a product were considered to be personal. Whilst one specific wine may give many people a sense of pleasure that positive response is not inevitable for every drinker.

### **3.2.2 *Appearance***

Appearance appeared to be generally regarded by informants as an intrinsic cue to the quality of wine, and as such it acts as a correlate of quality, rather than a

dimension itself (discussed in chapter 8 section 3.1 below). However, some informants considered it part of the nature of quality. Thus, in a BC focus group:

SJC: Tell me about quality.

Ellie (medium-involvement): Nice colour. As aesthetic as that sounds.

[later, following the tasting of wines]

SJC: Adam, [which did you like?]

Adam (low-involvement): I liked the first one.

SJC: You liked the first one? Tell me what it does for you?

Adam: The colour, I liked the colour. It's nice in the glass.

Ellie explicitly gains a type of aesthetic pleasure from the way the wine looks, which she sees as an integral part of its quality. Adam later echoed her perspective, when tasting the wines, linking appearance to sensual pleasure. A few other informants referred to the appearance of wine as a dimension of quality. Those who did perceive it as being a direct component of quality were more likely to be low- or medium-involvement drinkers. High-involvement drinkers seemed to assume that it operates as a cue.

### 3.2.3 *Gustatory dimensions*

A wider range of sub-dimensions was offered within this dimension than any other. The order in which they will be presented does not absolutely reflect the weight of responses given by informants, but instead is designed to make appropriate links and offer a logical progression through the gustatory factors. Thus taste and balance both featured as major concerns of wine drinkers but drinkability, smoothness and mouthfeel have been inserted between the two as they are perceived to have a close connection to and perhaps operates as a link between the two major sub-dimensions.

***Taste:*** When asked about the nature of wine quality more informants related it to taste (in its various guises) than any other single dimension or sub-dimension. This sub-dimension of quality has close links with the subjective conceptualisation of quality and has therefore already been alluded to in some detail. Nevertheless, it could be argued that for most informants the primary determinant of quality in wine



appears to be that it tastes good. In the following extract Nettie has been asked about her understanding of quality:

Nettie (BC, low-involvement): If I like it, if it tastes ok to me then it's fine.

[shortly after]

Nettie: I'm not talking about Grange or anything like that. And I do know that's good, that's lovely. But I can't tell you why it's different from the \$20 one or the \$10 one. It just tastes better.

SJC: You think it's better or you think you just like it more?

Nettie: I like it more and I know it's better.

Nettie firmly equates what tastes better to better quality. She was also clear, despite claims to have no sense of smell and a limited knowledge of wine, that the perception of higher quality is not just personal preference but a reflection of the objective quality of the product. Whilst some consumers, adopting a subjectivist position, equated good-tasting wine automatically with high quality, others made a distinction between personal taste influencing preference, and taste as an element (sub-dimension) of quality:

SJC: Broadly therefore if it tastes good you think it's high quality?

Briony (SC, medium-involvement): Not necessarily. Because sometimes if I'm with friends, or going out – and we're just having some wine before we go out for an evening we'll have cask wine and it tastes ok. Not the best - but I know it's not high quality ... You can always have better. Because sometimes they taste good but still not the best quality.

SJC: So taste isn't an absolute guide to quality but can you conceive of having a high quality wine that doesn't taste particularly nice?

Briony: I think so because everybody's taste buds are different. So one person might think it's good and one person might not but it's a high quality wine.

Almost invariably, informants who offered 'good taste' as a component of quality were low or medium-involvement drinkers (and included no professionals). At first sight this suggests that high-involvement drinkers may not consider 'good taste' to be a key sub-dimension of quality. However, it is clear from the responses relating to the motivation to drink wine (chapter 6, section 1.1.1) that taste is a key – perhaps the major – motivational factor. What appears to be happening therefore is

that high-involvement drinkers, when asked about quality, are presupposing that the wine will taste good in the first place, and then use other more precise dimensions to mark out quality. These dimensions could be other gustatory ones, such as intensity or complexity, or paradigmatic ones (discussed in section 3.2.4 below).

When informants stated that they considered good ‘taste’ to be a sub-dimension of wine quality they were asked to explain in more detail what they thought good taste was. The primary response was that it related to specific flavours. This was often a general comment, which informants felt unable to develop further, but at times taste descriptors could be more specific:

David (BC, low-involvement): I don't know if I can explain that good taste. Good taste? I would have to taste the fruit in the wine. Yes that's it. If I could taste the fruit, a grape or a melon or something then I think that's a good wine.

One element of taste that was relevant to some consumers was generic ‘fruitiness’ in a wine. However, whilst a few informants mentioned overall fruitiness as an element of taste, others were cautious about the idea. A few SCs and UCs commented that they also enjoyed more ‘developed’ wines<sup>5</sup>. One winemaker noted that ‘fruit-driven wines’ were typical of Australian wine production. She implied that the style was no better than wines with more developed or secondary characters, thus suggesting that general ‘fruitiness’ was not necessarily important to the quality of a wine.

Whereas the catch-all of ‘good taste’ as a sub-dimension of quality was not referred to by high-involvement consumers, flavour was important to them. Thus, before the following extract, Danielle had suggested that the memorableness of wine is one element of its quality (discussed further below):

Danielle (PR): Ok I'll give you an example of that... Shiraz is known to have some sort of spice or peppery flavour. But when that is really, clearly obvious ... it is just beautiful. Like a really nice, peppery shiraz. It's just amazing to think that I can get that element in a glass of wine [like] Mount Langi shiraz<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> A developed wine is one which is older and may have lost some of its fresh fruit intensity but gained other non fruit-related aromatic characters.

<sup>6</sup> An expensive and reputable shiraz produced from western Victoria.

Danielle comments approvingly of Mount Langi Ghiran Shiraz for its peppery aromatic character. She linked two gustatory quality sub-dimensions here (memorableness and 'good taste') and used specific flavours as a positive component in her assessment of the quality of the wine.

Connected to flavour, aroma and scent appeared to be taste-related quality sub-dimensions. This link is clearly physiologically closely bound up in the sense of flavour but it was mentioned separately by a couple of informants. Before the following extract, the interviewee was asked to discuss what she enjoyed about taste:

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): For sauvignon blanc and riesling - they're quite refreshing. I like the citrusy lemony taste. I tend to go for those sorts of things in fragrances as well - like Chanel 19. The light, citrusy fragrances - and I tend to like those in whites as well.

Laura makes the physiologically correct organoleptic link between the flavours she tastes in wine and the smell of the perfume she chooses.

***Smoothness:*** Whilst particular flavours and aromas were discussed as important elements of good tasting wine, so too was the concept of 'smoothness' which was referred to by a number of informants. Although technically it seemed to be a component of taste it was so important to some informants that it is dealt with as a separate category.

Smoothness as an idea is hard to pin down. Apparently it has aspects of flavour – but it seemed to go beyond that. The following extract comes from the analysis of the wines in one of the focus groups:

Hetty (SC, low-involvement): The fourth [wine] I think was quite a smooth red.

Although her words seem tentative, in expression Hetty was clear about her view that the red wine was smooth. Nevertheless, there did not seem to be a common perception of smoothness. The focus group continued:

Alison (SC, medium-involvement): I just disagree with everybody about the red, I didn't find that an enjoyable red to drink.

SJC: What didn't you like about it?

Alison: I'd drink it [but] it felt a bit dry to me - like it leaves me with a dry taste. And a few people said 'smooth' - and I didn't find it smooth at all. I agree it's spicy and a bit peppery.

Ingrid (SC, low-involvement): I agree with you.

Informants were regularly asked to talk more about smoothness, but offered no precisely common interpretation of the term. As shown by the disagreement above between Hetty and Alison it seemed clear that there were two unresolved issues. First, the physiological perception of smoothness varies from informant to informant. Additionally, as will be seen, the word actually had different meanings for different consumers in terms of what they were actually sensing.

Smoothness seemed to be most commonly defined by an absence of certain perceived negative factors in a wine. On balance 'smoothness' was a positive character more associated with red wines. When used in that context the more articulate informants tended to associate it with appropriate levels and fineness of tannins, thus making explicit what Alison was implying above. However, on some occasions white wine was also commended for being smooth, and in one focus group a sparkling wine was explicitly praised for its smoothness. In those cases (and also with some of the red wines) smoothness seemed to be equated to an absence of a 'vinegary' character (presumably related to the acid balance of the wine, and possibly to volatile acidity<sup>7</sup>). Absence of bitterness also seemed to be an integral component of smoothness. Thus, over a period of discussion in a SC focus group the following emerged:

Louis (low-involvement): I guess [quality is] smoothness in a way. And it tastes good to me. That's my measure of quality.

Sue (medium-involvement): ...Say with the red wine sometimes you feel that was a bit too much tannin or something. A bit rough on the tongue - you don't think much of the quality of that one.

[later, in response to the wines tasted, when asked for a preference, Artemis indicates a preference for wine No. 2]

Artemis (medium-involvement): [It] just tastes nice, nice colour... Actually for me it tastes nice and smooth ... and I'd like to have more of that one.

...

SJC: What is good taste in wine?

Nell (low-involvement): [A] smooth and not too bitter taste - that you think 'ugh.' Not vinegary.

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<sup>7</sup> Volatile acid is a component of wine caused by bacterial activity. In excessive amounts it is a wine fault, making the wine taste sharp and unpleasant.

Four of the participants in the focus group used the term smooth at different times and they identified three different characteristics as elements of smoothness: absence of astringent tannin, absence of bitterness and the absence of vinegariness.

‘Smoothness’ as a term was only used by low- and medium-involvement informants. However, it is worth noting the possible relation of smoothness to what professional tasters would call mouth feel – and possibly also balance (discussed below). Thus the term, whilst not used by high involvement informants, may represent an identical gustatory experience for which they have other language.

The different interpretations of smoothness (with red or white wines, and meaning an absence of excess tannin, or vinegariness, or bitterness) is evident. It is also clear from the comments made by Alison in the first SC focus group noted above, that one person’s perception of smoothness may be another’s sense of dryness. Thus there seems to be a favourable term in general use which has little common definition or understanding from drinker to drinker. This is especially relevant given the marketing advantage sought by some wine marketers who make a point of promoting their wine as ‘smooth’.

***Mouthfeel, body and texture:*** Connected with smoothness, (though not so much with flavour) was a view which saw the weight and/or feel of a wine in the mouth as a gustatory sub-dimension of quality. Thus, commenting on a preferred wine in a focus group:

Adam (BC, low-involvement): It ... filled up my whole tongue - tasted it all over my tongue. Some of the other ones just made me go 'ugh'. [I] didn't really get taste out of most of them. I liked this one because it filled my whole mouth up, some reaction in my mouth, but it wasn't making me go 'ugh.'

Similarly, with a consumer more at home with tasting jargon who was asked about quality:

Leo (UC, high-involvement): I think a lot of it is mouthfeel, how it is in your mouth. Whether it's finishing silky, velvety or whether it's finishing raw - you know, with too much acid, or whatever the case maybe.

Leo has absorbed the perspective which sees wine as being ‘silky’, or alternatively ‘raw’. It generates a feeling in the mouth, and this is what he notes when tasting the

wine. This element, mouthfeel, is not a component of flavour but of the tactile sensation of the wine when drunk. For a number of other informants mouthfeel was important. In fact the concept of 'body' in a wine comprises two components. As well as the 'feel' (texture) of a wine, there is also its weight. This was more important for some other informants:

Bella (BC, low-involvement): I specially like wines with a lot of body. That's why I drink the heavier [wines] - the shiraz and cab savs and all that .... When I went over to Italy and tried the wines there ... some of the generic brands that they pour in the restaurants there ... they were just like weak, weak wines. They had no body and you could just hold them up to the light and just see straight through them. I just love something with a lot of body.

This idea that wine should have weight or presence in the mouth was seen to be important by a number of consumers. It reflects the purported preference of Australian wine consumers, especially males, for 'big' wines that have been made with cabernet sauvignon and shiraz (Allen, 2002). Interestingly this preference (including specifically a penchant for those two grape varieties) was articulated in this study by female informants as much as male ones.

Unlike 'smoothness', body was a sub-dimension important to all types of drinker (including MEs and PRs) – yet there may well be a link with smoothness. It could be that higher-involvement consumers, socialised like Leo into the more 'precise' professional versions of winespeak, eschew as imprecise and 'uninformed' a term such as smooth, when in fact they are describing the identical experience of a quality sub-dimension. The fact that smoothness seems to have its roots partly in tannin (a critical wine component for textural qualities) may be responsible for this connection.

***Drinkability:*** Some informants claimed that drinkability – which is connected to, yet not identical to, taste - was a sub-dimension of wine quality. Thus:

Bella (BC, low-involvement): Is it something you can drink glass after glass of or do you stop at one and think 'I've had enough'? You know - like 'I've got a headache' or whatever. And I know if I can have a second glass, to me that's quality. If I take a few sips and that's it - to me that's not quality. And that's how I determine what I feel is worth buying again.

One test for the quality of a wine may therefore be how much, or how quickly, one is prepared to drink. A few informants from all reference groups and all involvement levels reported using this criterion. However, although drinkability was referred to as an element of quality it is arguable from the way Bella develops the idea that it is more an indicator of quality than a dimension (component) of quality itself. Bella herself earlier outlined other – subjective – dimensions of quality, and she appears here to be detailing what reveals the existence of quality rather than what quality itself actually is. To this extent drinkability may well act as a shield from the difficult abstract issue of engaging with the nature of quality. It is noticeable that where more involved informants referred to drinkability it was always explicitly in tandem with another more precise dimension of quality such as appearance, smoothness or, in the following extract (in a discussion about the nature of quality), with pleasure:

Vince (PR, viticulturist): I've got a single bottle test. If you take one bottle home for [you and] your wife - and you drink a whole lot of it - that's a pretty good sign that you enjoyed it, I reckon. And it doesn't matter, at the end of the day you enjoyed it - and then it doesn't matter. That's what it's all about, isn't it?

What 'doesn't matter' to Vince is the ritual and excessive gravity which has sprung up around wine consumption, when the key determinant of its quality is pleasure, and pleasure can be tested by how much of a wine he and his wife are prepared to drink.

In some ways drinkability as an intrinsic sub-dimension of quality may be seen to have a relationship to the extrinsic sub-dimension of 'fitness for purpose'. As noted earlier, the latter is about 'objective' production issues, while the former about the 'subjective' issue of how the wine tastes and the consumer's desire to continue consuming. If the wine is designed to meet its purpose, then one will want to go on drinking it.

***Structural balance:*** After 'taste', more informants listed the balance of wine as a gustatory sub-dimension of quality than any other concept.<sup>8</sup> Balance, when

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<sup>8</sup> The structure of the wine relates to the relationship of the key elements of its chemical makeup as they are sensed organoleptically. These include acid, sweetness, bitterness, tannin, alcohol, mouthfeel

expressed explicitly as a concept, was nearly always referred to by medium and high involvement drinkers. However, as has been suggested previously, lower-involvement drinkers may have considered it important but used other terminology (such as smoothness, or drinkability). Balance was an important quality sub-dimension for most high-involvement drinkers, and many of them implied that it was the most important of all the gustatory sub-dimensions. But whilst overall balance was perceived to be important, for some informants it was especially linked to one of the specific structural components of wine:

Nicolai (SC, medium-involvement, Russian migrant): I must get some sort of balance in taste. I don't like [it] say when there is too much of something... I found this in Australian wines, people put a lot of oak and forget about anything else. I don't think it's good [that a] quality wine should go to that extreme.

Thus Nicolai thought balance in general is an important aspect of quality, and in particular he was concerned about the balance of oak flavour in wine. Others expressed concerns about unnecessarily high alcohol levels, an appropriate smell/flavour balance, or, in a couple of instances, the intrusion of obvious wine-making influence - such as oak usage - as a factor which could create an unbalanced wine.

Balance as a concept was also related to other ideas or expressions. Finesse, elegance and harmony were words which were regularly used by informants. The two former terms imply that a balanced wine will avoid excessive intensity. Thus, one focus group participant was keen to qualify the idea of balance as an aspect of wine quality:

Oliver (UC): I'd go along with balance as well - but I tend to incline towards wine with elegance rather than power. You know really huge weight. So I go for balance but with the elegance where you're getting all the nuances and complexities, not just the one big hit.

A further term - harmony - crystallises the idea that a good wine will hold all its composite parts together in equilibrium.

Umberto (ME): If you're judging a young bracket of wine sometimes you might get some slightly raw edges with a bracket of wine. And in

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and the overall intensity of flavour (both in the mouth, and the intensity relationship between smell and flavour), including oak use. Some informants specifically linked structure to balance.



fact, when I do construct my notes, I have two little check boxes ... where I apportion my points. I have one for balance and one for harmony. Now technically a wine can be in balance but at a particular phase in its life may be unharmonious because the wood that's being used hasn't actually become a part of the wine. It still needs time to mesh.

For Umberto harmony refers to the impact of balance at a different times. He suggested that a balanced wine may not have 'meshed' – that its components may not have come together at a particular time in its life. For him harmony adds another facet to balance by relating it to the ultimate potential of the wine (discussed further in section 3.2.5 below). Other informants may have not agreed with this specific definition but still considered the concept of harmony important.

One other balance-related concept that was expressed was the idea of 'complete' or 'seamless' wine – epithets that tended to be applied to the very highest quality. Thus, for one winemaker during a focus group:

Noel: I reckon - and I think it will probably be [agreed] at this table - that the ultimate wine for us to make is a wine that's complete. And it's a very rare thing to taste a wine and everything about it's right ... You go 'Wow, that's a wine where the aromas are right, there's complexity, it's [got] the flavours right, the mouthfeel's right, the finish is correct, everything's...' And I don't mean it's correct as in precise - I mean just it's complete. And I think that's my aim, anyway.

The concept of completeness was not just a high-involvement idea but very much one focused on by winemakers (only one consumer used the term). This may reflect language used by oenological educators at the time the winemakers were studying; nevertheless it was a term used by winemakers of a range of gender, ages and geographic location. As Noel's comment suggests completeness seems to imply that the wine is perfect to drink - even if not, to a winemaker, technically perfect. It may be that other drinkers are unwilling to accept the idea of a perfect wine (or at least unwilling to volunteer their ability to pick it), so that for them completeness in this sense is a superfluous notion – whereas it is a goal that winemakers believe, occasionally, that they are able to attain. This has some similarity to the paradigmatic dimension of typicality to be discussed later, but is included here because completeness sometimes appears nevertheless to be apprehended as part of the process of tasting, and is thus primarily a gustatory sub-dimension of wine quality.

As an explicit expression of quality balance was only adopted by medium and high-involvement drinkers. However, as has been suggested in the discussion on smoothness, the concept, if not the term, seems relevant to lower-involvement drinkers. Yet even the professionals themselves seemed uncertain about the relevance of balance to low-involvement consumers on some occasions. Compare the following two comments:

Maria (PR): If you give wine to Joe Blow, who has a passing interest in wine, the main thing ... they recognise is balance. You know - something's harmonious.

Jeff (ME, distributor and occasional wine educator): Balance is probably one of the hardest things to get people to appreciate. When you're running classes people seem to - when they first go to classes - they look for things like body, which is probably something that is a bit more in their face, that they can understand. Whereas overall balance is maybe something that you really come to appreciate.

Maria thought that balance is what the average drinker with little product involvement is most concerned with. Jeff, however, found balance the hardest quality concept to convey to most drinkers, even in wine classes. He considered that balance something that one comes to understand later as a drinker. They may both be right. One interpretation of smoothness and drinkability may involve an element of balance (such as the absence of excessive tannin or unpleasant acid), which is clearly important to consumers. At the same time those very consumers who like smooth wine may find the concept of balance (including multiple components such as alcohol, mouthfeel, fruit intensity etc.) a hard notion to grasp. This may reflect a difference between a sensory response to tasting (reflected in the general responses of smoothness or drinkability) and a more cognitive response which discusses the balance of acid and sugar, or alcohol and fruit intensity.

**Concentration:** One gustatory quality sub-dimension identified involves the power or concentration of flavour of the wine. This has two key components – the intensity of the flavour when the wine is tasted in the mouth, and its ‘length’; that is, how long the flavour persists after the wine has been swallowed. For one interviewee asked about the dimensions of quality, intensity was critical:

Don (ME): Intensity. Intensity on the nose is something that I find very attractive. And I suppose I could fall into that trap of being

swayed by that big, upfront nose itself - and losing something that's behind. Intensity is something that I really rate very highly personally, both nose and palate.

Length, likewise, was important for some:

Stan (PR, contract grape grower, low-involvement): I suppose it's the finish of the wine, the after palate I suppose. Yes - some wines you've lost them as soon as you've swallowed them, there's no reason for you to speculate on them because you can't taste them any more.

For Stan the continued presence of flavour in the mouth was an indicator of quality.

The wines that are 'lost' offer less – perhaps less pleasure – and require less focus, as the taste fades so fast.

These views echoed commonly held perspectives among informants about length and intensity of flavour. On the other hand, there are differences between the two elements. The length of flavour was widely referred to as a key sub-dimension of wine quality by members of all reference groups and informants of all levels of involvement. However, the intensity of flavour actually in the mouth was only discussed by high-involvement drinkers, and especially, though not exclusively, professionals. It may be that for lower involvement consumers the intensity of flavour when the wine is actually in the mouth is bound up in the all-purpose sub-dimension of taste, so that as long as the flavour is good, the intensity is unconsciously accepted. Once the wine is swallowed, however, it could be that drinkers (whatever their involvement level) pay attention to the continuing echo of the flavours, and the persistence of those echoes is generally seen to reflect quality. Drinkers who are more educated in tasting, on the other hand, make a distinction between the intensity and the flavour of the taste even when the wine is in the mouth.

Intensity and length of flavour are not absolute positives. As one interviewee pointed out, length of flavour is no use if you do not actually like the aftertaste:

Dan (BC): The other most important [factor] as I mentioned before is the aftertaste. You know, you can swallow some pretty horrible tasting things and survive them as long as they don't come back to haunt you. We do that with medicines and various things like that ... But then when I drink it I don't mind the lingering after taste - but I don't want it to be like garlic ... So I suppose I want a fairly mild or low key after taste.

Dan is clear that aftertaste can have a negative, as well as a positive impact on the perception of quality in a wine.

Likewise it is important to note that intensity of flavour can provoke an ambivalent response – and this is where the overall balance of the wine is seen to be important. Intensely flavoured wine is not invariably a good thing. This ambivalence can be seen in two lights – a positive and a negative. The negative, excessive intensity, making the wine unpleasant, is a reflection of the perspective given by the Wundt curve (chapter 2, section 4.3.2). During a PR focus group, one participant objected strongly to one of the wines that she tasted:

Jill: It's just a bit too full on, just a little bit too much for your nose to handle. It's almost like an absolute bombardment of your senses - which is not what some people might like that in a wine ... I don't want to be bombarded.

Jill found the intensity of flavour too much – it ‘bombarded her senses’, when perhaps she would have preferred a little restraint. The flip-side of that negative perspective is the positive concept of intrigue and subtlety:

Simon (UC, high-involvement): I used to like big fruity wines and all that sort of thing and that's changing ... These days I'm sort of looking more for more subtlety and delicacy - and nuances [in] the way the thing is put together.

Simon realised that intense, fruity wines (which elsewhere he claims that Australia excels at producing) are no longer sufficient to sustain his interest. What he explicitly seeks is a careful control of the wine’s intensity, combined with factors which offer him more interest (discussed under complexity and distinctiveness, below). Just as the concept of intensity was very much one adopted by high-involvement consumers, so the ambivalence about it – both negative aversion and the positive alternatives of subtlety and nuance – were also high-involvement perspectives.

**Complexity:** Nearly as common as references to concentration of flavour were comments about the complexity of wine being a sub-dimension of its quality. In this instance complexity relates primarily to the variety or layers of flavour of the wine. Complexity appears to be linked to higher wine quality levels and it was not merely important for professionals:

Mike (UC, medium-involvement): If you talk about quality in wine, for me it would be complexity. A variety of tastes or feelings associated with the wine.

Mike's comment reflects what many medium and high-involvement drinkers seemed to think. However, whereas most informants who considered complexity important talked about complexity of flavour, Mike actually related it to 'feelings' as well. This makes the relationship between the 'cognitive' analysis of complex tastes in the wine and the affective element of the quality engagement process much more explicit than most informants would have seen it to be. Complexity was not referred to as an aspect of quality by low-involvement informants.

***Interest:*** The final gustatory sub-dimension of quality which has a number of elements to it is, perhaps because of those many elements, the hardest to classify:

Morag (UC, high-involvement): Quality wine should have ... good length, it should have complexity. It should be interesting, perhaps above all.

Above all, Morag suggests, quality revolves around interest (something which she distinguishes from complexity, although the two may be closely related). Morag was, in fact, the only consumer to use that precise term, but interest can be grouped with other notions such as personality, definition and distinctiveness. As will be discussed further, it is unsurprising that this sub-dimension of quality was the hardest for informants to define precisely. What follows comes from a PR focus group:

SJC: Vince and Noel both suggested balance was the most important quality component. Does anyone else want to offer anything else...?

Vince: A difficult one though is like - character. I guess wine with fruit balance - they seem to express some sort of character that we don't see in, I guess, a wine that's really dominantly fruity or oaky. [It] has an individual stamp, I guess. It's own personality, I suppose.

Vince – an articulate and 'widely tasted' viticulturist - is struggling with defining a further component of quality – beyond the characteristics of balance, texture, complexity and length which have already been mentioned. The hesitant, uncertain way he approached the idea of interest reflected his difficulty, and the term he alighted on in defining the concept was to talk about its personality (a definition which is adopted shortly after by another member of the group). His use of the term personality was echoed by drinkers in other interviews – although it was only wine producers who used it. Again it may be that there was some common origin to the terminology stemming from the training they had received.

Whether or not they thought interest or personality important - but in order to explore the concepts - most informants were asked explicitly if they felt that 'distinctiveness'<sup>9</sup> was a feature of the highest quality wine. Further, in certain instances the issue of distinctiveness in wine was raised voluntarily by some informants. The issue provoked a variety of responses. To the extent that drinkers accept interest as a dimension of wine quality, these responses illustrate their understanding of it.

Most informants who gave a categoric comment on the issue tended to think that distinctiveness of some kind is important in a higher-quality wine. In the following extract Danielle, a student winemaker, is commenting on the relationship between quality and personal taste. Her preference for Mt. Langi Ghiran Shiraz has been noted earlier, and she returned to it again:

Danielle (PR): I think Mt Langi in itself stands out on its own - for example. Because it's a very fruitful, it's a nice concentrated, complex shiraz and the complexity - added complexity - is the pepperiness ... It's the extra 'wow'. That wine stands out on its own. Not only is it good quality - it's unique. It's got a bit [of] personality.

For Danielle the other gustatory quality sub-dimensions seemed to be important – she mentioned fruitiness, concentration and complexity. But the extra component, the one that makes Mt. Langi Ghiran Shiraz a special wine, is its uniqueness – the 'wow' factor. Whilst this general perspective was especially common to high-involvement drinkers, it was echoed across the range of reference groups. The following exchange took place during a BC focus group when participants had been asked for their preferences on the wines tasted:

Angela (BC, low-involvement): I'd say wine number two - probably because I ... haven't really tasted anything around [like it] lately - it just tasted different from what I'm used to tasting. And it was nice.

SJC: Is that a good thing that it tasted different?

Angela: Mmm. I think so.

Angela appreciates the difference in her preferred wine from other wines that she had been drinking recently. Her response is also significant in another way. When low-involvement drinkers did comment approvingly about distinctiveness as an aspect of

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<sup>9</sup> Used here to express the idea that a wine is original and has some organoleptic features which mark it out from all other wines.

quality they were much more hesitant than was apparent among higher-involvement drinkers. Angela had not been initially prompted in this context, but she, like most BCs who responded positively to the topic, talked as if the idea had only just come to her.

A few informants did not consider the distinctiveness of an individual wine an aspect of quality, as the following focus group suggests:

Hetty (SC, low-involvement): I think I choose it for a style. I'm not sure that that one particular wine would be so different from the others. I like that style.

SJC: And you're buying into a style really?

Cleo (medium-involvement): That's what I do too. I mostly drink riesling - so I try a lot of rieslings. But I actually hope most of them will taste like the riesling I enjoy.

This dissenting view was broadly held by low and medium-involvement drinkers, though one high-involvement consumer added his voice to it:

Sean (UC, high-involvement): I don't think [wine] has to be necessarily distinctive to show quality - but it has to be a better example.

A high quality wine, Sean went on to suggest, may show the same characteristics as a lower quality wine – but may have more of them, or display more balance between them.

Whilst only a few informants disagreed with the idea that distinctiveness was an aspect of quality, a number expressed uncertainty about the idea, or in their answers showed some ambivalence towards it. Thus:

John (ME): I'm not sure the relationship of being different is actually physically reflected in quality - it ... may be, it may not be. It depends what it is. Interesting fruit character - it probably is quality. If people think it's different it might be H<sub>2</sub>S or something.

John concludes that 'interesting fruit character' may add to the element of quality in a wine, but a fault, such as hydrogen sulphide, may provide distinctiveness to the wine without actually adding to its quality and in fact probably detracting from it.

Some of those informants who agreed that personality, character or distinctiveness was an aspect of wine quality were prepared to develop the theme. Three specific elements of distinctiveness were offered by a number of informants: memorableness, origin and vintage variation.

The memorableness of a wine was the most commonly discussed element of distinctiveness. This has a direct relationship to the importance of memory and recollection as a motivation for consumption (chapter 6, section 1.2.2). Ursula, prior to the extract that follows, had referred to a wine she had enjoyed some years before. She returned to it again:

SJC: Do you think for the wines that are really nice ... part of what makes them good is that they're different from anything you've had?

Ursula (BC, low-involvement): Distinctive?

SJC: Distinctive is precisely the word.

Ursula: Yes. I never found that wine. I had it at the Qantas Club in Melbourne a few years ago. I don't know what it was but I drank a hell of a lot of it because it was just so nice.

SJC: And you can't remember what it is?

Ursula: No ... I know it would have been a NSW wine and it was white and it ... was just beautiful.

Although – typical of a low-involvement drinker - Ursula could not remember the name of the wine she drank, it made a dramatic impact on her. She enjoyed it enough at the time to drink a lot of it, and to remember years later how pleasurable it had been. Ursula was unusual, however, being the only low-involvement drinker to be this explicit about distinctively memorable wines. Generally it was higher-involvement drinkers who not only tended to see distinctiveness as an aspect of quality but then to relate it to the memorableness of the wine. In their case they could usually mention a named wine which had offered them that element of quality in the past.

The second element of distinctiveness, offered by a few informants, was the relationship of a wine to its origin. For some this could be fairly broad:

Mike (UC, medium-involvement): But sometimes you try a new wine from a different region - like Orange ... for example. And you're quite surprised by a different taste in a wine from a different region altogether - from a wine maker you've never heard of before. So sometimes it's nice to explore those regions as well.

Mike gave the example of a new, untried wine region that offers a distinctive experience. Others, even more precisely, related this element of distinctiveness to a specific vineyard plot. Clive is taking part in a focus group discussion about winemakers' aims with the wines they make:



Clive (PR): In essence [I want to] reflect what comes out of the vineyard - which is really a big, fat cliché. But put something of interest into it. I like wines with interest.

For Clive interest equates to reflecting a specific vineyard in the wine. This has a close connection to the paradigmatic quality dimension of origin (discussed in section 3.2.4 below).

The final element of distinctiveness which was explicitly offered by informants was vintage variation – the slightly different, weather-related characteristics of a wine from year to year.

Richard (PR): I think as you go higher up [in] cost ... people are choosing to drink wine for different reasons. And the more subjective notions of quality, the notion of drinking a label come into it. And people would probably be disappointed with a Grosset Polish Hill - if they were regular drinkers of Grosset Polish Hill - if they didn't perceive vintage variation. If the 2001 wasn't somewhat different to the '98. And if they opened a '98 next to 2001 and they didn't see age and they didn't see an evolution and they didn't see change - they'd be very disappointed.

Richard was conscious that he was making a judgment about how consumers may view wine (he said that explicitly subsequently), and it may be that what he articulated expressed his personal view – that variability from vintage to vintage is positive for the interest it creates. Nevertheless, his view was supported by some consumers as well, although it was a perspective held entirely by medium- and high-involvement informants. It is also important to contrast the role of vintage variation with the antithetical attitude of some consumers who see consistency of what they are drinking, including consistency from year to year, as a key dimension of quality.

Part of the difficulty of explaining the importance of 'interest' in a wine is that it is – for high-involvement drinkers - the least concrete of the gustatory dimensions of quality. Taste and smoothness seem to be subjective, and in any event are terms avoided by the highly involved. Balance (based on physical properties of the wine), length and intensity are all susceptible to quantification, and even complexity has a certain 'objective' sense to it which can be conveyed to others. Interest (in the sense of personality and distinctiveness) is a much more personal response to wine. Added to that is the fact that – for the attuned wine taster (professional or consumer) – balance, length, intensity and complexity have established a firm place in the organoleptic lexicon (discussed in more detail later),

whereas none of the terms which comprise interest have such a formal place in the wine taster's vocabulary. This means that high-involvement drinkers have been less socialised into the use of these terms. Inevitably, therefore, they seem more tentative in their exploration of the terms and seem to believe that it is a more subjective dimension of wine evaluation than the other gustatory sub-dimensions.

To conclude this section it can be suggested that the gustatory dimension appears to comprise more sub-dimensions of wine quality than any other. It was also, perhaps, more widely acknowledged than any other dimension of quality, except perhaps pleasure and enjoyment. Whilst it seems to be a haphazard collection of issues, merely related because of their organoleptic nature, there is a certain logic to them. 'Good taste' (which here includes smoothness), was the primary gustatory sub-dimension. It was critical for low and medium-involvement consumers (and possibly was presupposed but not articulated by high-involvement drinkers). As a sub-dimension it is very sensory, and perhaps affective. Body, drinkability, structural balance and concentration were more generally accepted as important across all ranges of drinkers. Whilst these still have a sensory aspect they also involve a cognitive response (one has to think about the texture of wine, or what may be 'unbalanced' about it). Complexity and interest were important for fewer informants. Where they were important, they tended to be mentioned by higher-involvement drinkers. They were perceived to be the elements of the gustatory dimension most applicable to the highest quality of wines. Thus they are what, in a continuum of wine quality, marks out the very best. Interest and complexity are also the most cognitive of the gustatory dimensions, although there is still a sensory component to them. As has been suggested 'interest' is rarely if ever defined in standard wine 'texts' so that, even for high-involvement drinkers, they have few or no role-models who use it as part of their language.

### ***3.2.4 Paradigmatic dimensions***

The paradigmatic dimension of wine quality contains three sub-dimensions (the reflection of origin, varietal purity, and typicality). These sub-dimensions are

classified as paradigmatic because they all envisage wine quality as a reflection of something else. It is as if there were an external template providing an 'ideal' wine, and quality evaluation becomes a process of matching the actual wine to this external, perfect ideal. (To that extent, these quality sub-dimensions are very similar to Plato's theory of forms, one of the earliest attempts to understand the aesthetic ideal (Dickie, 1971; Plato, n.d./1951)). Within this process paradigmatic sub-dimensions are both objective and relative: they relate to the external ideal (objective) but are used comparatively, by judging the actual wine against this ideal.

***Reflection of origin.*** For some informants there was a view that the quality of a wine is directly related to where it comes from. This intrinsic sub-dimension, affecting the wine as it is tasted, has a clear relationship to some of the extrinsic dimensions of quality relating to wine production. It is included here, however, as some informants perceived it to be intrinsic to the wine. It also is related to the gustatory sub-dimension of interest, where the ability to taste the terroir (site) in which the grapes were grown may add to the excitement of the wine.

Some drinkers suggested that wine should, when drunk, show features of the region from which it comes, or even more specifically of the vineyard where the grapes are grown. This is a long-standing view outside Australia, and implicit in much of the European approach to 'quality wine' (see chapter 4, section 4.2.1). Some Australians also adopted this perspective:

Keith (ME): I think with those great wines you have a coming together of regionality, of the terroir factor. The right variety and the right soil - given the right treatment and managed through to the consumer. I think we don't really understand yet in Australia the importance of viticulture. And it's a great shame that - because of the influence of the cult of the winemaker in Australia - that we haven't put really enough time into getting the best expression out of our grapes. And people around the world are doing that.

For Keith 'great' wine requires a matching of the right grapes to the appropriate viticultural environment (explicitly the soil). The wine should be managed, both in the vineyard and the winery, to allow full expression of what those grapes, grown in that place, are like. He contrasts this non-interventionist perspective favourably with another view, that the winemaker is the determinant of wine style, with winery

technique creating a wine which has more muted or non-existent regional or local character. Although a ME, Keith's view - that wine should reflect where the grapes come from - was also shared by a number of winemakers.

This very precise perspective on quality as a reflection of origin was only expressed by the very high-involvement drinkers. Indeed, a number of those informants were aware that they have a fairly arcane viewpoint. Thus:

Ryan (ME): I think that if you look at a lot of people who drink very - I hesitate to use the word commercial - but say broad brands with high visibility, hard brands shall we say. The Wolf Blasses or whatever. A lot of those people couldn't care less where Wolf Blass chardonnay comes from... They don't care whether it comes from Clare Valley or Barossa Valley. They just look at the brand.

Ryan works as a sales manager for a prestigious distributor, selling both a range of Australian brands and also some high-reputation Burgundies. Burgundy, perhaps more than any other French wine region, trades on the differentiation of wine produced by different vineyard sites, and Ryan is therefore intimately linked to wine sold on the basis of those distinctions. Even so, he notes that for the mass of wine drinkers such a perspective is meaningless and of little use for selling most wine brands in Australia.

*Varietal purity.* Some informants considered that one dimension of wine quality is that the product epitomises the grape variety (or blend of varieties) from which it is made. When a focus group was discussing the nature of quality, Siobhan was keen to add to the debate:

Siobhan (UC, medium-involvement): And also I want to add to that ... grape variety exhibiting what they should exhibit. I think that's nice.

Siobhan wants grape variety to 'exhibit what it should exhibit' – to reveal its varietal character. Siobhan, however, was the only consumer to give this perspective on varietal purity. Again it was the professionals who expressed it most consistently and most clearly:

Tim (ME): I like a wine that shows really good varietal character, first and foremost. And maybe I would never have said that years ago when I was a sommelier. I might have leant towards style more - but I think varietal character's really important.

For Tim clear varietal character in a wine he drinks is the main dimension of quality. It is, in passing, interesting to observe that Tim had a dynamic perspective on the nature of quality; he was conscious that his views fluctuate. Previously he would have considered stylistic definition more important; now he looks first for a demonstration of varietal fruit. This supports the suggestion that perceived wine quality may not be a static ideal but one which develops in the drinker over time.

**Typicality.** A few informants talked of style and the typicality expected of that style<sup>10</sup>. Wines show quality, these informants suggested, if they display the expected typicality.

Simon (UC, high-involvement): Quality in wine is ... if you buy it it's typical of what it is - and it represents that style and what you expect. So if ... I see something that I think looks interesting that says it's a sauvignon blend ... then I hope I know roughly what the combination will be and that comes up with.

[later, asked about a specific 'high quality' bottle he has purchased]

Simon: It has a particular quality I've experienced in no other wine... It's a cabernet sauvignon/merlot blend, very Bordeaux, very Bordeaux style.

Typicality to Simon (and to some other informants) related to a combination of style, grape variety and region. Very often a 'stylistic' wine is one that has been blended from a number of varieties and thus displays less pure varietal fruit and more the array of flavours and structural components that one would expect from that mix. To that extent style operates as a combination of the two previous sub-dimensions.

Again, all the informants who referred to typicality were high-involvement drinkers. This seemed to be true for all forms of paradigmatic quality. It may therefore be that the ability to conceive of an ideal of quality, against which the quality of a particular wine can be judged, requires considerable knowledge of the product. Additionally, and probably more important, there may have to be some substantial experience with wine which allows the drinker to build up a store of benchmarks against which to judge subsequent examples.

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<sup>10</sup> Style can be seen as a description of the type of wine, rather than a specific variety. Thus a wine can be a 'full-bodied, tannic, heavy red' rather than a cabernet sauvignon. Typicality is defined here as a reflection of style, which may also include variety and origin combined.

These paradigmatic forms of quality (especially varietal purity and stylistic definition) are important within the context of the wine show system where they form part of the basis for judging wines. Given what has been suggested about paradigmatic quality only being utilised by high-involvement drinkers, it seems likely that many judgments made by show judges are based on a process (using paradigmatic quality dimensions) that is substantially alien to the vast majority of consumers.

### **3.2.5 *Potential***

A few informants discussed the ability of a wine to age as a dimension of wine quality. This is an interesting dimension. It is intrinsic to the wine itself, it is gustatory in the sense that it must be evaluated organoleptically in the present but it can be divorced from immediate pleasure. Where potential is a dimension of quality then the quality of the wine is apparent now but its enjoyment is a form of deferred gratification. To that extent no informant offered ageing ability as a sole, or even paramount, dimension of quality. It could, however, be integral to the concept alongside other dimensions, as the following extract shows:

Charles (UC, high-involvement): If the wine is free of wine faults then it's a good wine. But I'll judge quality generally according to price, how much I'm paying. If I'm paying \$50 per bottle of wine I'm expecting a very good wine that's going to be complex, that's going to have the ability to cellar for at least the medium to long term. And that is going to be enjoyable.

Cellaring potential features alongside enjoyment, complexity, value and technical correctness in Charles' perspective. Charles is a high-involvement consumer, and all informants who considered ageing potential as a dimension of quality were either UCs or professionals. Low involvement drinkers did not raise the issue, so it did not figure spontaneously as an element of quality for them – even when they expressed a liking for older wines. In part this may be due to the difficulty that drinkers, even the most expert, have in truly assessing the future potential of a wine. It is possibly the case that only the highly involved would consider the cost and effort of such deferred gratification worthwhile. Most consumers would treat wine as a drink to be bought and consumed immediately.

Whilst some agreed with Charles that cellaring potential is a dimension of quality, others were cautious – at least about the idea that quality can improve with age:

Tom (PR): [There] is this belief that a good wine is bad when it's young and great when its old. I don't think it's true. A good wine is always a good wine. They don't all of a sudden mysteriously just happen. They're always there, that balance and harmony ... and how you did it winemaking wise I don't know.

Even Tom, an experienced winemaker, finds the concept of ageing potential hard. If a wine is good quality, then he considers it maintains that high quality throughout its life, and the ageing process cannot turn a poor wine into a good one overnight. But as a winemaker there is another mystery. The process of assessing ageing potential may be hard, but even harder is the issue of how you produce a wine with that potential – with the balance and harmony required to let it reveal its quality when it is mature.

Ageing potential functions as both an absolute and a subjective dimension of quality. It is absolute because the development of that wine with time is external to the drinker, and, as long as cellaring conditions are appropriate, is a fixed process. It is subjective because the assessment of its drinkability (especially in the form of balance and complexity – key gustatory dimensions that one seeks to have revealed with age) remains very personal to the individual drinker.

### **3.3 The operation of wine quality dimensions**

#### ***3.3.1 Multiple dimensions of quality.***

As will be readily apparent by now, informants offered multiple dimensions of quality in their discussions of their personal experiences with wine. More precisely, it seems that most – certainly the more knowledgeable – informants offered dimensions across the spectrum of intrinsic quality dimensions. Thus:

Jill (PR): From a winemaker's point of view perception of quality is in terms of what that wine can give you. And the enjoyment - and the satisfaction. And the longevity of that wine - both in terms of in your mouth at that time, and then in your cellar, to enjoy years down the track.

For Jill quality includes pleasure, it includes at least one of the gustatory sub-dimensions – the length of finish of the wine - and it also includes potential, the cellaring ability of the wine.

### ***3.3.2 The interrelationship of wine quality dimensions***

A number of tentative, interim conclusions can be reached about the dimensions of wine quality and how drinkers view them. First, for some people, one way of understanding quality is to suggest that it has elements which have an impact on the wine-in-the-glass, but which they have no engagement with. The grapes that are harvested or impact of the work of the winemaker can be seen as falling into this category. They have a direct impact on the quality of what is tasted, but the drinker may have no understanding of their significance nor how they actually result in that organoleptic quality. Whilst this may be viewed as part of quality, in practice these issues almost become preconditions for the drinker's engagement with quality. They certainly cannot form part of that quality experience themselves directly, as the drinker cannot directly substantiate the quality of the grapes, or the production processes.

Otherwise quality may be understood as an experiential process – whether it involves the remaining extrinsic dimension (marketing-related factors) or any of the intrinsic dimensions. Nevertheless, this type wine quality again appears to operate in distinct ways. As has been suggested, pleasure and enjoyment (widely held to be core elements of the engagement with quality) can be viewed as terminal states. All other dimensions (including the marketing-related ones) can be viewed as instrumental. Another way of expressing this is to suggest that pleasure and enjoyment are the experience of quality. The other dimensions cannot, discretely, be seen to be that experience itself. One does not value the structural balance of a wine or the fact that it shows varietal purity for themselves but because they reflect or mark out the quality that one is actually experiencing, or they improve the pleasure of the experience. To that extent these other quality dimensions, whilst nonetheless integral to quality as a concept, can be viewed as indicators or, perhaps more accurately, catalysts of the experience of quality. One can also see this as a relationship between different forms of response to wine. Pleasure is a very affective response. The other dimensions tend to be more sensory (especially taste and



smoothness) or cognitive (such as complexity or interest) in function. One can suggest that the experience of wine quality potentially goes from an (immediate) sensory response to a cognitive response, which may, in turn, both reinforce the sensory response and/or also lead on to an affective reaction.

This experience of wine quality allows for both subjective and objective perspectives. Pleasure and enjoyment are personal. Some, at least, of the other dimensions are susceptible to a more objective interpretation. Varietal purity is one example – as are some of the gustatory dimensions. For some informants this objectivity was crucial in their determination of what is, or is not, a quality dimension:

Neville (ME): I just look at it from the judging point of view. Balance, intensity, length, complexity. Everything else is probably more subjective than that so that's the only measures that I use.

SJC: You feel that balance, length, intensity, complexity are objective measures?

Neville: As objective as you can be. They're not 100% objective but they're as objective as you can be.

These particular dimensions (balance, length, intensity and complexity, often explicitly referred to as the mnemonic BLIC) were frequently used by some informants, especially professionals, as one means of making a rapid – very cognitive – assessment of quality.

Finally one can note the close apparent connection between most of the quality dimensions and aspects of motivation to drink. Thus, for instance, there is a close relationship between complexity as a quality dimension and diversity, exploration and intellectual challenge as spurs to consume. One winemaker stated this explicitly:

Maria (PR): But - I think - the reason why wine intrigues us is because of the intellectual game that it draws out of us. You see a wine that has been more interesting because it does have layers of complexity. A simple wine doesn't do that for you.

Maria is speaking in a group discussion on the nature of quality. For her there is a close link between challenge, complexity, quality and why she drinks. Another example would be the importance given to taste as a quality dimension, and the enjoyment of taste as a reason for drinking – and for some the paramount reason (see

chapter 6, section 1.1.1). Perceiving quality, therefore, seems to be situated in the motives prompting people to drink wine in the first place.

## **4 Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the nature of wine quality. The results have specifically been used to explore two major topics. The first is how drinkers tended to conceptualise wine quality, specifically within the fourfold typology of quality outlined in chapter 3, comprising objective, subjective, absolute and relative quality. Second, the results have been employed to outline the various dimensions that informants considered quality takes. This includes both terminal quality (pleasure) and catalytic quality, which may be extrinsic to the wine as it is consumed, or intrinsic to it. These perceptions were examined in the context of the difficulty in envisaging quality and a sense of ambiguity about its relevance, as well as the idea that quality exists not dichotomously, but as a continuum.

However, whilst this analysis has considered what drinkers consider quality to be, it has not dealt with how they reach their quality judgments. Apprehending quality is critical to the understanding of perceived wine quality, in order to see how drinkers arrive at their quality evaluation of a wine. It is not only necessary to investigate how wine quality is conceptualised and how its component dimensions are described by drinkers but consideration must also be given to the actual processes utilised to engage with the quality dimensions.

## **CHAPTER 8:**

### **ASSESSING WINE QUALITY**

#### **1 Introduction: contextual problems with evaluating wine**

The following analysis of how drinkers assess quality comprises four main topics: (1) the impact of knowledge and experience, (2) the role of the correlates of wine quality (cues, price and value, the situation of consumption and personal taste), (3) the process of evaluating wine, and (4) the approach taken by the drinker (cognitive, affective or sensory). However, before embarking on that analysis, it is worth making some preliminary points about the difficulty of assessing wine. It is, as will be shown, generally perceived to be a complicated process which is made harder by the intricacies surrounding the language used. As a result informants came up with a number of ways of simplifying the problems they face when evaluating wine, including using gatekeepers. The function of tasting wine versus drinking wine was also important for some informants.

##### **1.1 The difficulty of assessing wine.**

As has been noted throughout the findings, assessing wine quality is perceived to be a difficult process:

Frances (UC, medium-involvement): I hear people talk about the balance in the wine, and the elegance, and the perhaps the potential. This is something that I feel I'm not very good at.

Frances, despite having had frequent exposure to formal wine tastings and to many highly reputable wines, claimed that the process of evaluating these wines, and specifically of considering the catalytic quality dimensions, is something she finds difficult. Frances' general uncertainty was replicated on occasions across all informant reference groups. There are a number of ways in which this difficulty may

occur. It may relate to situation, to the process itself, or to the focus or training necessary for wine evaluation.

### ***1.1.1 Situational problems***

A number of situational factors may contribute to the difficulty of evaluating wine. In the following extract Fred, an occasional musician, is talking about the drinks he sometimes gets served when performing in a hotel:

Fred (BC, low-involvement): They've got a particular house white, or something with their own label on it ... And I taste it - and I don't know whether it's ... \$40 a bottle or \$10. And sometimes I think ... it's the effervescence of the occasion - but I don't know whether it's \$40 or \$10.

The occasion, Fred suggests, may overwhelm his powers of analysis especially as he is performing, and may be in a fairly noisy and intrusive environment, which gives the occasion 'effervescence'. Thus, when he does not know which wine he is drinking, he is unable to place its quality. (He used price, in this case, as an index or marker for quality – see section 3.4 below).

### ***1.1.2 Process difficulties***

Whilst situation could exaggerate the difficulty of evaluation for Fred, for some other informants it was the actual process of evaluating wines that was hard. Diana was a SC with an interest in wine, and had just started attending a wine education course. When asked what processes she uses to evaluate wine she commented:

Diana (SC, medium-involvement): Well, this is something that we've been learning about on this wine course. I have to say that trying to define the tastes and aromas - I find it very difficult to isolate a flavour and say 'that's grapefruit', or 'that's kerosene', or 'butter'. I find that very difficult. So I suppose I don't know. I sort of smell the wine and then taste and think 'that's luscious'. It's just an overall impression if you like.

She senses that she should be showing some coherent, analytical approach to the evaluation of wine, but finds – as many people do – that it is hard to place precisely the flavours that she is tasting. She falls back on an overall impression to reach a decision about the wine's quality. This difficulty with the process of assessment and the related issue of articulating the reasons for evaluation were common responses,

especially amongst low- and medium-involvement drinkers. Moreover, even high-involvement drinkers may find it hard on occasions:

Kate (PR): I get confused with lots of different wines. Sometimes I think 'oh God, that was brilliant'. And then you have it again and I think 'oh ok' [or] whatever. But you get confused.

This is a surprisingly honest admission from a winemaker – they are, after all, trained to evaluate a range of wines as an almost daily function of their work – yet Kate still finds it a confusing process on occasions.

### ***1.1.3 The need for focus***

As a corollary to the difficulty of assessing wine a few informants were explicit that the process of engaging with wine requires focus (as noted earlier in the discussion on the aesthetic nature of wine). Typical of those who were explicit about the need for focus was Norman, who talked about the time when he would travel away from home to work, and often buy a cask wine for enjoyment as he worked in the evenings:

Norman (BC, low-involvement): I think it's a matter of distraction or concentration. Sitting in the motel room, I'm very much aware of my friend Bacchus and the quality of what I've got there - because you know there's just silence, perhaps, and the laptop and me. In a barbecue you're chatting, you're laughing, I might even end up singing. So you are distracted, I suppose, to some extent. Unless somebody specifically brings your attention to it and says 'this is a such and such, what do you think,' the chances are you don't prejudge it that much. You just say 'oh that's a chardonnay, very nice, thank you,' glug, glug and down it goes. I think it makes a difference what concentration you're putting on the actual drink that you're having.

When Norman can concentrate on wine, he argued, he can reach some conclusions about its quality. When he cannot focus he just accepts the offer of a drink and 'down it goes'. The implication is that he does not think about it carefully.

Focus was also an issue for higher involvement drinkers. A wine journalist asked about tasting responded as follows:

Umberto (ME): First up, I think it's a lot to do with your preparation. I think you've got to be focused ... I think you've got to be focused - if you like - in your analytical process.

This view was held by a number of professionals and high-involvement consumers, and it has echoes of the concentration demanded of the aesthetic attitude, according

to aestheticians (chapter 6, section 2.2.1). It also reflects aspects of the ‘flow’ experience (see chapter 2, section 4.3.4).

## **1.2 The role of language in the evaluation of wine**

Problems about the lack of a common understanding of the terms used to describe wine have already been noted. In any attempt to evaluate wine quality problems of terminology appeared to compound the evaluative difficulties already outlined. These terminological problems seemed to revolve around two connected difficulties. One was the situation where the specific words used were personal to an individual, and therefore hard for anyone else to grasp. The second was where the words were in common use – but the interpretation of them varied from individual to individual.

As an example of the former the following extract from a BC focus group can be noted. Ellie and George are discussing the third wine which they had tasted:

Ellie: I smelt sort of broccoli and greens stuff, what do you smell?

George: Something like a weak cheese sort of thing. [As if] it has ... been in an oak barrel or something and they haven't cleaned it properly. Something's growing in it.

Ellie: Something in a Dr Who special.

George: Yeah.

They have agreed that the wine is unpleasant – but their language, reflecting the different aromas that they identify, means that they reach agreement by different means. One smells green vegetables, the other cheese and uncleaned barrels. They end up with an idea less defined, and entirely abstract, though possibly more evocative - the smell of something out of a television programme. In the event, having tasted the wine together their lack of linguistic convergence was unimportant – in fact their varying comments seemed to reinforce rather than weaken their distaste for the wine. However one can extrapolate from this example to other situations. If they had not both tasted the wine their vague terminology may not have adequately communicated its poor quality. This is especially true of their concluding comments.

One might expect that this linguistic diversity would have been more of a problem for low-involvement consumers, whereas the more highly involved would have the experience and knowledge to provide linguistic precision. However, as the following extract from a PR focus group suggests, that is not necessarily true. In this case the second terminological problem - the varying interpretation of words in common use - presents the problem. The group is discussing the varied dimensions of wine quality:

Gemma: Concentration, I think, as well complexity.

...

Hal: I'd say intensity more than concentration.

Maria: I'd call intensity concentration.

SJC: How would you distinguish intensity and concentration?

Hal: You can have wines that aren't particularly concentrated but have amazing amount of intensity. I'd look at them in different ways. I would consider concentration more as volume in terms of concentration, intensity of fruit, of florals, of character, which isn't particularly concentrated. I don't know - it's hard. They are pretty similar in a way. I'd use them in a different context, I guess.

Maria: Concentration almost seems to get sort of bullish.

Hal: Yes - it's like thick and heavy.

Gemma: Maybe that's right. Maybe concentration means that they've... The opposite to concentration is diluted, therefore concentration is a water [related issue]. I think that perhaps that's right - intensity is there. I'm thinking German riesling.

Hal: Yeah, in German riesling, I wouldn't describe it as concentrated, I would describe it as amazingly intense.

Hal objected to Gemma's use of concentration as a dimension of quality rather than intensity, which he thought better. Trying to distinguish them was hard, however. Concentration, Hal claimed, is about 'volume' (normally a measure of auditory rather than organoleptic sensation) and about context – although he did not expand on that point. Maria's criticism of concentration was almost semiological – that the word has 'bullish' overtones (perhaps excessively weighty, cumbersome, domineering, or dangerous to china), although she did not clarify why intensity does not have that connotation. Gemma, trying to fit into the mood of the group, explored intensity as a concept though she spoke without real conviction. Hal finally seized German riesling as a wine to prove his point, but still found it hard to make his

distinction clear. The two terms are in regular use by professionals at wine tastings, but in this extract there seemed to be a lack of a common understanding about how they should be applied. Such problems cloud the evaluation of wine quality, and also challenge communication between experts and non-experts on the subject (discussed in appendix 6, section 2).

### **1.3 The influence of gatekeepers**

The role of acknowledged experts and opinion leaders on the evaluation of wine quality is a complex one. In many instances their key influence is as a writer or critic who recommends a wine, and thus they operate as a cue (and are dealt with accordingly in section 3.2.5 below). However, their function goes beyond merely acting as a cue. Just as some informants felt that the concept of quality was something which exists beyond their experience (discussed in chapter 7 section 2.2), so they relinquished the evaluation of that quality to others more expert than themselves. In the following extract Diana has been asked to discuss similarities between the appreciation of wine and music.

Diana (SC, medium-involvement): People are professional experts in their field - and they obviously know more what they're on about in music or art, or wine than I do. I'm just going on personal choice, whereas they're drawing on all sorts of criteria - and methods of doing things. And so you know it's like anything, bow to someone else's expertise.

Diana has already been quoted noting the difficulty in being precise about what she tastes and smells in wine. Whilst she accepted the existence of an 'objective' quality in wine, she focused much more on her own individual preference as a response to the product. In this extract she observed that critics know much more than her about it and thus she is prepared to 'bow to their expertise' as arbiters of quality. Such a view seemed not to be held by high-involvement informants. Whilst they may acknowledge the importance of gatekeepers in providing cues, they would not abdicate to them the final judgment about a wine's quality. It is also worth observing that this approach – leaving someone more expert to decide on quality – tended to be reported more by female than by male informants.



## 1.4 Tasting and drinking

Tasting wine – as opposed to drinking it – is a process utilised by professionals and taught to interested amateurs. Both tasting and drinking may involve the evaluation of wine quality. However, for professionals it is the tasting which is perceived to be the crucial situation for quality evaluation, although it may also be enjoyable, as the following extract suggests:

Don (ME): I tend to make a differentiation between drinking and tasting wine. When I am tasting wine that is perhaps not drinking wine. When I am going out drinking wine then I really am looking for matches with occasion - and as an extension of that with food.

[Later]

Don: [Tasting is] something I enjoy and it's something I do. But if I'm tasting wine I'm spitting the wine - and I'm drinking it for evaluating. And it really has a work element to it. I do it because I enjoy it - but it is work and you need to be alert and on your toes - and really concentrating on using your senses in as scientific as possible [an] approach. Whereas if you're drinking wine you may swirl and sniff and go 'ah that's lovely, that's enticing' - but do you take the effort to start working out which part of the fruit spectrum that smell actually comes from? Probably not. I certainly don't.

Don was clear about the different lives within which wine operates for him – the professional and the personal. He could enjoy wine in both contexts, but enjoyment was perhaps more evident in the personal, where wine melds into a situation which includes pleasure, food, people and relaxation. Tasting is enjoyable, but it is hard work and requires focus. The quality evaluation in that context is more precise and more supported by analysis, whereas in the personal existence he may appreciate the beauty – thus the quality – of the wine, but without analysing why by ‘working out which part of the fruit spectrum’ the aromas come from.

Whilst Don showed equanimity about the split of the personal and the work existences and enjoyment of tasting as a process, not all professional informants agreed with him, as this extract from a PR focus group suggests:

Melissa: But I think [that with] the wines I enjoy, what I like most of all are the wines that evolve so beautifully in the glass. You're sitting down to a dinner and you smell the wine. And you have a couple of bites to eat and you smell the wine again - and you get really excited. And the wine's getting better. To me that's an awesome wine. That gets my highest quality rating.

Noel: Yeah - and you don't see that in a line up do you?

Melissa: No you never see that in a line up.

Melissa is also an occasional wine show judge and the highest quality that she would afford to wines occurs not in the artificial environment of a tasting but in the context of a meal, with time to focus on just the one wine (or possibly a very few). That level of quality, as Noel confirmed, is not awarded when evaluating a larger bracket of wines. There was an element of *ennui*, even of distaste, about using formal tasting to reveal quality and that was expressed by professionals in other interviews. Again one has a sense of uncertainty about the divorce that professionals, especially winemakers, feel about their professional and personal lives; about the need to be objective in their creation and evaluation of wine and the personal desire to enjoy and experience it.

Consumers did not necessarily hold formal tasting in such high regard. At least one low-involvement consumer, who could not have experienced the professional perspective, showed a reluctance to pursue the formalised, clinical approach to the evaluation of quality via structured tasting:

Norman (BC): I'm not interested in [formal tasting]. And my colleagues often said to me 'why don't you concentrate a bit more on what you're drinking?' I say 'because I simply enjoy a nice glass of wine.' That's me. I'm not interested in pursuing that matter any further. If it's a nicer tasting one – great. But I'm not going to be sort of weighing it up, and 'is the flavour on the tip? Is it on the back of the tongue? And the bitterness - and the after finish' or whatever. I'm not interested in that particularly.

Norman enjoys wine on a daily basis and accepts that there are quality variations between wines, but for all that does not see any need to waste effort learning how to hone his evaluative skills. There is an unspoken sense that he feels that the simple enjoyment of drinking would be lost if he did learn more about tasting. His fear of losing his pleasure in wine is the low-involvement reflection of Melissa's professional concern about formalised processes.

## **2 Knowledge, experience and consensus**

### **2.1 The need for training**

For some drinkers it is not just focus that is required to evaluate quality but the appropriate training or knowledge. Medium- or high-involvement informants were more likely to express this view. In the following extract Morag is pondering whether or not there is a linear relationship between wine quality and price:

Morag (UC, high-involvement): I'm sure there are very expensive wines out there that are absolutely not quality wines. And you ... have to know about wine to really be able to appreciate a difference.

Morag considered knowledge about wine essential to its evaluation. This view was mirrored by some others, including a few with a lower involvement level than Morag.

On the other hand a number of informants expressed a contrary view – that whether or not they have the ‘knowledge’ anyone can see quality in a wine which is presented to them. However, this was not, as one might expect, a common perspective of lower involvement consumers, but rather a view more likely to be shared by high-involvement drinkers and especially professionals.

Tom (PR): I like to believe that everybody has the same innate ability to judge wine. And I think that it's a bit of a myth that ... you need years of training before you can tell the difference in quality of wine. I think ... I can put wine in front of people who haven't tasted a lot of wine, at three different quality levels - and they can easily pick it. They understand the difference, it's not a very difficult process ... Now whether they all like the same thing may be a different point of view - but they can describe what the differences are in those wines.

...

SJC: What you said is everybody - you think - has the ability to judge how good a wine is?

Tom: Yeah. It's just putting language to that. It's like if you talk about science. Science is really explaining the things that are around us. Tasting is really putting words to a sensation that we all have. It's just that link between actively building up a library of terms that describes what's happening.

Tom's view – repeated in various ways by some other informants – is that knowledge and experience are not essential to the judgment of wine. All that

knowledge and experience bring is the language to articulate those judgments. (Section 2.3 below may lend some weight to this assertion). This ‘anti-elitist’ view is the opposite of Morag’s, and it is interesting that this position is maintained by the most knowledgeable drinkers; those who are most articulate about wine. Low-involvement informants – perhaps from a lack of security in the worth of their own judgments – seemed less likely to make that claim for themselves, and preferred to fall back on the claim that ‘I know what I like’, or that quality has no objective existence beyond their personal preference.

## **2.2 The relevance of consensus judgments**

Related to the idea that anyone can evaluate wine quality with a certain degree of accuracy is the concept that, between a group of individuals, there will be some agreement about how good a wine is; thus that there is some consensus about the quality of wines. The following extended extract from a ME focus group gives a good insight into the various ways in which this is perceived to work, and it is in direct response to the topic of how they evaluate quality:

Paul: But overall wouldn't you say - across the world - that the people who drink more wine, that are experienced with more wine - if you gave them a line up you might get a wine of supposedly high quality - of better vines, better made - and lower yields etcetera. But - I would have thought - across the board you would get more of those people saying ‘that's the higher quality wine’ and perhaps ‘that's the lesser quality wine’. But then if you show the same wine to someone in ... an \$8 price bracket - rather than a \$50 price bracket - perhaps that target audience would actually prefer a different wine that's being made for them.

Jeff: I don't know that it would, I think a lot of it comes back to what are they familiar with.

Rupert: Quite often in those tastings it can come back to finding out which bottles have gone first.

Paul: That's a pretty good indicator - but all I'm saying is [would] the same bottle, amongst a group of 19 year olds, who don't drink a lot of wine ... be the first bottle to empty ... [as] amongst a group of...

Jeff: ...Doctors. [Laughter].

Paul: Let's not stereotype too much - but yes.

Jeff: Consensus normally comes from the loud mouth who speaks first.

Emily: I disagree.

Jeff: It's pretty tough. It really depends on the experience of the people who are looking at the wines. Most people who are pretty happy with their own palates - and their own approach to wines - aren't going to be swayed too much by what other people in a group are going to say. And a lot of people [who] try wines for the first time - certainly in my classes - are very much swayed by anything they hear, whether it be necessarily right or wrong.

Rupert: I think - from a professional point of view - I think that you do ultimately come to a consensus to a degree. Having done a number of those sort of tastings, you will often find that, within 10 or 15 people, you will often come back with two wines which actually are fractionally marked higher than others ... It's interesting when you have at a look at the Cullen chardonnay tasting, and you look at consumers versus trade. There is a distinct difference between the two groups but ultimately there's three wines that are performing across [both groups].

Paul: And you're talking about reasonably high levels [of tasting skills].

Rupert: Peel Estate shiraz tasting is another - ultimately there is discrepancy but there is a core 5 or 6 wines that everyone will put in the top 5 or 6 wines.

Emily: I agree with Paul on that too - because part of my job now is in-store tastings - and so I'm dealing with the novices. The people that are actually coming through the shop to get to the supermarket from the car park - that see a free wine. And so that's what I'm really finding - you've got three or four wines and you do get that consensus.

Paul started by postulating uncertainly that – at least amongst seasoned wine tasters - quality does get established by a broad consensus. He developed his theme by suggesting that this consensus may operate across different groups of consumers (19 year olds would be considered inexperienced wine drinkers while doctors are, amongst wine professionals, notorious for their love and knowledge of fine, expensive wines). Jeff, a wine distributor who is also a part-time wine educator, maintained a sceptical approach to this throughout – he suggested that either consumers are experts, secure in their own judgment, or novices, who believe whatever they are told. Rupert developed Paul's idea, using the example of some high-profile (and expensive) tastings – frequented by high-involvement aficionados and professionals – to suggest that both consumers and professionals will commonly identify at least a small group of superior wines from a number offered to taste. Emily takes the point further. Evidence from her job, providing instore tastings, led

her to conclude that even novices will select the highest quality wine out of a group of three or four when asked to taste.

Where this perspective on consensus was held (and Jeff's comments show that it is not universally accepted), it only seemed to be a perspective of medium and high-involvement drinkers. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that they actually observe consensus operating at group wine tastings (which low-involvement drinkers would not – as they are unlikely to attend such events). A second reading is that high-involvement drinkers are seeking to validate the objectivity of the judgments they have been trained, or socialised, to make. They believe that their status as professional or connoisseur depends on the independent confirmation of their skill. One of the few ways which they have of establishing that belief is to maintain that there is a consensus of like-minded and similarly skilled people who concur with their judgments.

### **2.3 Consensus wine judgments: A quantitative perspective**

This research project was developed using a qualitative research methodology, and with no expectation of any quantitative outcomes. However, as consideration of the data was in progress it became clear that there was also one area where a more numeric analysis may be of interest.

Use of the wines in the focus groups was originally designed as a stimulus to allow closer, often observational, examination of participants' views on quality. Wines were selected deliberately to ensure a range which would be perceived to be of varying quality levels in the market place (a judgment based not just on price but on expert evaluation). By this judgment wine one was deemed to be very high quality, wine two of moderate quality, wine three an oddity which would now generally be considered to be of poor quality and wine four would be considered of high to very-high quality. The wines were all presented to the participants masked, so they were unaware of the brand or purported quality level.

As discussed above, one of the issues raised by a number of informants was a dichotomous approach to the evaluation of quality. One side of this dichotomy suggests that either everyone, however knowledgeable about wine, can evaluate wine quality quite accurately (though not necessarily articulate that evaluation).

Alternatively, it is argued, accurate and effective wine tasting requires great expertise and is a function which can only truly be carried out by a few.

If the former argument were correct then the preferences of all participants would tend to concentrate on wines one and four. If the latter argument were correct, one would expect the professional participants to consider wines one and/or four the best but the consumers (especially BCs and SCs) to have more or less randomly scattered preferences across all four wines.

The results of this analysis are shown at table 8.1 Two consumer participants failed to express a specific preference. Others, during the course of discussion, suggested that they had split preferences, and were recorded as such.

**Table 8.1 - Focus group participant wine preference**

	Wine 1	Wine 2	Wine 3	Wine 4	Unsure
Total participants ( <i>n</i> =62)	23.0	8.5	1.5	27.0	2.0
%	<b>37.1</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>43.5</b>	<b>3.2</b>
Total professionals ( <i>n</i> =27)	13.0	3.0	0.0	11.0	
%	<b>48.1</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>40.7</b>	
Total consumers ( <i>n</i> =35)	10.0	5.5	1.5	16.0	2.0
%	<b>28.6</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>45.7</b>	<b>5.7</b>
BC %	40.0	10.0	0.0	40.0	10.0
SC %	38.5	15.4	3.8	42.3	
UC %	8.3	20.8	8.3	54.3	8.3

The data are interesting. As expected, the professionals overwhelmingly expressed a preference for wines one and four (89%), and none were willing to opt for wine three. Consumers were not so definitive in their response, and wine one was not so popular with them – perhaps in part reflecting the difficulty of evaluating sparkling wine, or because they were less used to drinking it. Nevertheless, 79% opted for either wine one or wine four.

Intriguingly, and counter-intuitively, it was the UCs (with more high-involvement drinkers and, one would expect, more experienced tasters), who were the least likely to follow the professionals. They showed a 63% preference for wines one and four, whereas BCs and SCs both recorded an 80% preference for these two wines. One explanation for this aberrant UC preference may lie in the dynamics of one of the focus groups, where a particularly dominant participant forcefully expressed a preference for wine two, which seems to have persuaded some others to follow, thinking that he would be successful in identifying the ‘best’ wine. This is supported by the fact that UCs who preferred wine four did so proportionately to the overall trend, but an abnormally low number of them opted for wine one. Another explanation for this odd distribution of UC preferences may be that unlike lower involvement participants they felt the need to ‘try harder’ in their assessment. BCs and SCs were more likely just to follow their initial instinctive response to the wine, whereas UCs typically spent time mulling over their response and actually ‘talked themselves out’ of an initial preference for one of the other wines<sup>1</sup>.

It must be stressed that the focus groups were not designed to allow this quantitative analysis of participant preference, which was performed as an afterthought. There was therefore no statistical precision in the selection of the wine, nor in how the process of tasting was carried out. The total sample is small and the analysis has not been tested for statistical significance. The conclusions are therefore tentative and suggestive only. However, they do tend to accord with some research which cautiously suggests that there may be a correlation between amateur and expert evaluations of aesthetic products (Holbrook, 1999b; Schindler et al., 1989) and that there are occasions in which ‘objective’ and ‘quasi-objective’ judgments of aesthetic products can attain consensus (Solomon et al., 1984).

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<sup>1</sup> This would reflect the commonly repeated ‘wisdom’ of expert wine tasters that nine times out of ten the taster’s initial response to a wine is more accurate than any variation to that response following a period of reflection.



### **3 Cues and value**

As has been noted research on cues as an aspect of consumer behaviour has a long history and there has also been some empirical research on cues within the consumption of wine. It is not therefore proposed to add further general information to the extant body of knowledge by providing additional data on what is already fairly well understood about the extrinsic quality cues for wine. However, where there are aspects of cues that relate specifically to wine as a product (especially appearance and ‘terroir’) then more attention has been given to informant perspectives. Additionally, as price and financial worth generally are thought to operate in such a complex manner they are considered separately from the other cues.

#### **3.1 Appearance**

The research project was designed in part to investigate informants’ views of wine quality within the context of the intrinsic cues which may affect wine consumption. Whilst appearance has been noted previously as a quality dimension for some informants, in this case it operates as the primary intrinsic cue to wine quality. This is especially relevant given the importance credited to colour as a quality cue by a number of producers (see chapter 4 section 5.1).

When asked about the importance of the colour of wine as a factor in quality evaluation, essentially three responses were offered: (1) some maintained that appearance was an infallible pointer to quality (a response that was only offered by some low-involvement consumers); (2) some suggested that appearance was an indicator to quality but no more than that (a view which tended to be held by some high-involvement consumers and professionals); (3) others claimed that there was no relationship between appearance and quality, again a perspective predominantly of the more highly involved drinkers. Each perspective is discussed in more detail below.

### **3.1.1 *Appearance as an absolute guide to quality***

The first viewpoint was that appearance was an absolute guide to the quality of the wine. In the following extract a focus group had been asked if there is a direct relationship between how a wine looks and its quality:

George (BC): In the glass yes, in the bottle no.

[later]

George: If it was a red I'd expect a nice dark red, a deep colour - and it's very consistent like from top to bottom even though it's been sitting for a while. And ... if it's a white wine I expect a nice golden sort of colour - to say 'well that's definitely white wine'. And again that sort of consistent colour top to bottom. To me it immediately says 'yes that's a good quality wine'. But basically, I'm judging a book by its cover.

George admitted that he was using extraneous information to reach conclusions about how good a wine is – he was 'judging a book by its cover', but was adamant about his viewpoint. Where such a definite perspective was given, it was invariably held by low-involvement consumers.

It is worth noting that whilst most drinkers associated depth of colour with red wines some informants, like George, also linked it to white wines. On occasions, however, the relationship was inverse; that is, some suggested that a paler colour for white wines was more likely to be associated with high quality, suggesting a reluctance of some informants to drink older or oak-aged wines.

### **3.1.2 *Appearance as a pointer to quality***

Other informants suggested that colour could be suggestive of wine quality, but that there was no automatic relationship between them. In the following extract Belinda has been asked if appearance matters generally – before the conversation moves on to consider depth of colour:

Belinda (ME): Again it depends what the variety is. If you see a Barossa shiraz that's young and purple and bright you're going to get quite excited about it. If you saw a young shiraz that's looking brickly and brownny you'd be a bit concerned about it. If you saw a pinot that's muddy looking and brown you'd be concerned about it too. Yes colour is a factor - but it just gives you guidance towards a conclusion about what the condition of the wine is.

SJC: So it's an indicator rather than an absolute guide?

Belinda: Mmm.

SJC: Do you think depth of colour matters?

Belinda: For shiraz and cabernet - definitely.

SJC: So the deeper the better?

Belinda: Yeah in those styles. Whereas we know sangiovese has those brick colours at the edge - and the same with nebbiolo and pinot. Nice sort of cherry colours in the glass. Rhone style wines tend to be a little lighter [like] the southern Rhone grenache. [It] depends on the style. Intensity, colour intensity is a good thing.

Belinda starts by noting that the hue of the wine is important as a guide towards its likely condition – a point made by many professional informants, and some higher-involvement consumers. Thus brownish wine is likely to be oxidised. She then explicitly considers the depth of colour (as opposed to hue) and concludes that for some grape varieties – the thick-skinned cabernet and shiraz – it is important. For others it is less so. Thus, whilst generally a good thing, appearance is only an indicator of ultimate quality. This approach was especially – though not exclusively – taken by a number of medium- and high-involvement and professional informants.

### **3.1.3 *When appearance is not a quality cue***

Other informants considered that there was little relationship between wine quality and the depth of its appearance.

SJC: Do you think there's a relationship between the appearance of wine in the glass and its quality?

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): Not really to be honest ... Obviously [if] you've got a young wine and it's brown you approach it with a bit of caution. And you know whether it's quite rich in colour. But variety's also a bit different. But other than that - no I don't think there's a great deal of difference.

Laura also made the distinction about condition of wine, and notes that it may be rich in colour, but ultimately for her depth of colour did not make 'a great deal of difference'. This approach was taken especially by high-involvement consumers (though some medium-involvement consumers like Laura also adopted it). It was also espoused by some professionals – although they appeared to be split roughly equally between those who felt that appearance was an general indicator of quality and those who felt there was no relationship. One winemaker was especially forceful

that - in her view - the need to obtain deep coloured wines was primarily a marketing device:

Melissa: I don't care. I don't think [about how deeply coloured wine is]. I'm a bit of a fan of some European styles that, I think, are just incredible - and without the density of colour. In Australia, I think, we concentrate on it heavily ... because our marketing department has told us that the public want dark wines. So we work hard to make sure that that colour's really good – and, to be honest, I don't care. I don't care if it's light or dark. I just care if it smells good and tastes good.

It is especially interesting to note Melissa's contention, as one who makes wine, that the need for deep colour is primarily a marketing tool, or that it is a marketers' misinterpretation of what customers seek.

### **3.2 Extrinsic cues**

The extrinsic cues for wine seem to behave in similar fashion to product cues in general. In terms of the density of informant response the most significant cues appeared to be price (discussed separately in section 3.4 below, owing to its importance and complexity), followed by packaging and brand. However, three of the apparently less important cues (producer, origin and recommendation) seem to function in a distinctive fashion for wine, and are also worth examining in a little more detail.

#### **3.2.1 Packaging:**

Many consumers interviewed considered the packaging<sup>2</sup> of a wine to be an important indicator of the quality of the wine. Almost as often, however, consumers seemed likely to discount the idea. What follows is from a BC focus group:

Bella (low-involvement, marketing executive): I love packaging. If I want to test a new wine ... I will literally look at the packaging. Being in marketing [I'm] going 'yeah, great product, logo – yeah - the colours'. And I will test out wines or have a go on that. And I've found some good ones ... If I don't know a lot about wine I will go

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<sup>2</sup> Packaging was generally interpreted by informants to be the label and bottle design. As an aside it is worth noting that a couple of informants voluntarily raised the issue of the use of artificial bottle closures, rather than corks, and in both cases they were negative about the concept.

with something that is jumping out at me - and I'm thinking 'they're doing their job as marketers to get my attention, they've got it, I'll try that.'

Ben (low-involvement): I'd feel the other way round - that if they've put an awful lot into packaging maybe there isn't so much in the bottle.

Clare (low-involvement): That's happened a lot now. They all come up with weird names like 'Fishy' ... and pink bottles, and what have you. And I used to like this but now I say 'great marketing' and move on.

These conflicting perspectives were common across all consumer reference groups. However, whereas professionals were split about packaging as a cue – with at least some admitting it did have an impact on them - the one group which tended to be uniformly sceptical about packaging as a cue was the high-involvement consumers. They had a general perspective that packaging was important only for other people:

Oliver (UC, high-involvement): From the point of selling wine I think that one can't underestimate things like label. So many people buy wine because of the label ... Those come across to me as the major reasons why other people buy wine - and mention why they'll buy that specific wine. [It's] because of the label.

Oliver was quite clear about the importance of the label as a cue for quality – but it operates for 'other people'. It could be suggested that, for him with his intimate knowledge of wine styles and attributes, the label was less important. He is able to use other cues which are likely to impart more information about what is actually in the bottle. His was a common perception at that involvement level. Only one highly involved interviewee said that she might be influenced by labels – and even then she was not certain that would happen – just that she did not discount the possibility.

### **3.2.2 Brand**

A number of informants, at all involvement levels and across all reference groups, acknowledged that brand could be a cue for quality:

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): I'm a big fan of Capercaillie which are based in the Hunter - and I've been quite impressed by their consistency. And if it was an unknown brand from Coonawarra I'd probably go to Capercaillie, because it's a brand that I've known and developed over time.

This extract comes from a discussion about the relationship of various cues to quality. Laura explicitly acknowledged the influence of the Capercaillie brand as a potential quality cue. Higher involvement drinkers also recognized brand as a cue to the assessment of quality – but often tied it to other specific factors relating to the wine:

Wendy (PR): I buy on brand. If I think someone's a good producer and I like their wines, I'll buy their wines. If I pick, for instance, Jeffrey Grosset - I think 'oh he's put out a sparkling wine', I haven't ever had his sparkling wine - and because I know that he's a good wine producer, I'll buy that.

Wendy, the wine producer, thinks of brand in terms of other winemakers. For her brand is important not so much because it denotes quality, but because it conveys other information (in this case the name of a highly reputed winemaker) which in turn denotes quality. For the lower involvement consumer, as typified by Laura previously, it seems that brand tends to denote quality *per se* – based perhaps on reputation, or past experience with the wine. As Laura's comments about the consistency of Capercaillie wines suggested, in this case brand operates to convey not specific, factual information (as for Wendy) but security.

Not all informants saw brand as a positive cue:

Damian (BC, medium-involvement): It's brand familiarity. You can't tell me Reeboks are better shoes than any other shoe - even though they're more expensive than any other ... It's just a brand recognition. Same thing with wines.

Damian was cautious of brand as a means of adding value to a product without adding quality. High-recognition branded wines are more expensive, but not necessarily any better than 'unbranded' wines. A few other drinkers expressed a similarly sceptical approach.

### **3.2.3 Origin**

After price, packaging and brand, the origin of a wine appeared to be the most noteworthy extrinsic cue. Origin as a cue is fairly well investigated in the marketing literature (see chapter 3, section 3.2.2) and generally refers to the country of origin of a product (for instance Lee & Lou, 1995/96). With wine the importance of origin may be more local than that.

Kevin (SC, medium-involvement, graphic designer, Sydney resident): I particularly like Western Australia, anything Western Australian. Mostly for their ads as well. Yeah, the other well known ones [too]. Coonawarra and things like that.

...

Kevin: Ninety percent of the time that I open a Western Australian wine I've gone 'that's pretty good'. I don't know if it's my own psyche telling me that. I don't know - I just find a high hit rate of something good.

Kevin uses Western Australian origin as a cue to quality, and it gives him some certainty – although not an absolute guarantee – of 'something good'. As a graphic designer, however, he also associates the 'quality' of the advertisements which are promote Western Australian wines with the quality of the wines themselves. There seemed to be a tendency for origin as a cue to be used more by medium and high-involvement drinkers, although that was not absolute.

For some drinkers, the use of origin as a cue goes beyond merely a preference for a state, or even a region, but down to the specific site on which the grapes are grown. Within Australia this is often interrelated with brand (because, with smaller producers, there may be a single site used for the brand's varietal wines). However, with overseas wines it may be the vineyard irrespective of the producer which acts as the cue. When it occurred this was very much a high involvement response – and it links closely to the paradigmatic dimension of wine quality relating specifically to origin.

#### **3.2.4 *Winemaker***

As with other aesthetic products the reputation of the person who actually crafted the wine may be a cue indicating quality. It is worth noting, following Wendy's comments above, that winemaker and brand may be interrelated in some instances. In the following extract Charles is pondering the relationship between knowledge of who made the wine and its potential quality:

Charles (UC): I think it probably affects more the expectation of quality than quality itself. Because if I know a wine's been made by Philip Shaw then I'm expecting it's going to be a good. Or [made by] Gary Farr - then I expect it's going to be a good wine, no matter where it's from. It could be from an unknown region - but if it's made by one of those guys then I'm expecting quality.

Philip Shaw was – at the time – the senior winemaker at Rosemount Estate, whose wines Charles had previously mentioned as favourites of his. Gary Farr is one of Australia's most reputable makers of pinot noir wines. Charles notes that these names, whilst not part of the quality, nevertheless act as cues. Even if their wine comes from a previously untried region, he will be prepared to try it with the anticipation that it will be good. This perspective was only held by medium and high-involvement drinkers, though a number of PRs also noted that they valued the reputation of some of their colleagues as a cue to quality.

### **3.2.5 Recommendation**

Some informants used recommendation as a cue for quality.

Recommendation can come from many sources, including friends, retailers or the wine show medals that a bottle may display. For Mavis, in the following extract, it was a journalist who writes in the local newspaper who provided this:

Mavis (UC, medium-involvement): It gives you some idea of what's new. And also they say 'drink now' ... or 'drink later'. And also it's quite nice if they say in recipes 'eat with lamb, eat with seafood.' That's quite interesting too. And that has a bearing on what you buy sometimes.

Mavis is prepared to spend quite a lot of money on wine, and enjoys it, but knows less about it than some other UCs. She appreciates precise information as a cue including advice about when to drink a wine. She also likes to know what foods a specific wine may match. This information allows her to focus on specific wines to buy. Others agreed with her:

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): Huon Hooke or James Halliday say 'oh this wine's fantastic' [so] you pay attention. And you might even go out and buy it based on the recommendation.

The use of gatekeepers tended to be an issue for medium-involvement consumers, suggesting that it is people who have some interest in and knowledge of wine who feel the need for the advice of critics. On the other hand the less interested, who have no desire to read about wine (and may be sceptical of the recommendations of others) are less likely to refer to gatekeepers, as are the highly-involved who have more sense of confidence in their own evaluative powers. The practical implication of this is that wine marketers wishing to make the most effective use of wine writers and critics should provide them with wine samples that will be most attractive to



medium-involvement consumers. In price terms that may mean wines in the \$10-20 range. The exception to the tendency for recommendation to be used mainly by medium involvement drinkers was, perhaps, recommendation by a friend, which one low-involvement informant acknowledged utilising.

### **3.3 The operation of cues for wine quality**

It has been acknowledged that – in general operation – some cues may carry more weight than others (for instance Jacoby et al. (1971) where price appeared less important as a cue to beer quality than brand). Additionally either intrinsic or extrinsic cues as a group have been felt to have more general weight in varying circumstances (Zeithaml, 1988). The findings of this study indicate that individuals may accord very personal weightings to certain cues. Consider the following extracts from two consumers, both considering the way that wine appears in the glass:

Nettie (BC): No I don't like champagne. As a girl experimenting we used to drink that bloody awful Porphyry pearl on Mardi Gras - ugh - that was the Australian thing in the sixties.

...

Nettie: Yeah, it just feels like fizzy drink. I don't like the fizz. Wine's not supposed to be fizzy.

Karen (SC): I guess the appearance of it is influencing ... Colour and the body - if that's the right word - would influence my thoughts.

SJC: In what ways?

Karen: Say if it was a white wine - and it looked a bit greenish - I'd kind of think 'Wooo, I don't know whether I'm going to like that'. I suppose that might influence me.

Nettie – who uses ‘champagne’ as a generic term for sparkling wine - was emphatic that wine should not be sparkling – a theme she reiterates later. Karen was much more tentative in her consideration of appearance as a cue. It may have an influence for her but no more than that. In both cases appearance may be a quality cue but, as Nettie expresses it, the cue is overriding – nothing else will persuade her that a sparkling wine may be good quality. For Karen the cue was – potentially - one amongst a number. It may have greater or lesser weight according to the interaction with other cues (she had already mentioned show medals). Her uncertainty (‘I

guess', 'I suppose') offered a sense that it may ultimately be overridden at the time of consumption – which she had previously declared was the point at which the drinkability of the wine was to be judged. Thus different cues do not necessarily operate at the same level of importance for all consumers.

The comments made by Nettie about her refusal to consume sparkling wine are a reminder of another factor; cues are not necessarily a prompt to purchase (by implying quality) but may also function to discourage purchase by discounting quality. Indeed, the same cue could lead different consumers to opposite conclusions. What follows comes from two focus groups, where participants were discussing their preferences for the wines tasted. Each of them is referring to wine number 2:

Artemis (SC): Just tastes nice, nice colour

Maria (PR): That second wine's unattractive. I say I don't worry about colour but I find that colour really off.

Maria, speaking technically, thinks that the colour is unacceptable for a wine, and has used that cue (supported, as she later suggests, by organoleptic assessment) to suggest that the wine is poor quality. Artemis, a consumer, likes the appearance, which in turn is also confirmed – for her – by the wine's positive taste.

### **3.4 Price**

As noted in the literature review price is often considered to be a primary cue but the understanding of how it functions is imprecise. Critically, however, it operates both as a symbol of anticipated quality and as a marker for the sacrifice the consumer will make – a twofold function (Teas & Agarwal, 2000). Much of the research on price has described it simply as a cue – that is, as an undifferentiated indicator to quality. However, this research suggests that even when it is perceived to have a relationship to quality, its operation is more complex than merely as a prompt to buy a particular wine. As will be examined, price could be used as a cue, but some informants were sceptical about that function. Occasionally price would be equated precisely to quality *per se*. At other times it seemed to function symbolically.

### 3.4.1 *Price as a cue*

As one would expect, price was generally seen to be an indicator of wine quality, although different informants accorded it varying amounts of weight. For many, of all involvement levels, price could be a helpful guide to what one could expect in a wine. Thus:

William (UC, medium-involvement): It's a benchmark for higher quality. It's a guide.

Nevertheless, price as a cue seems to operate in two different ways within the purchase situation. It is the other factors which produce a specific purchase rather than price, which is not a direct prompt to purchase a wine. The following takes place within a general discussion about extrinsic cues:

Roz (UC, medium-involvement): I agree with the label definitely. I think if you ... fancy a shiraz, for example, and you've got half a dozen on the shelf in front of you, [and] they're all in the price range you want ... yeah, I will sometimes look at the label. If they're right in the price range that I want, [and] they're the grape that I want [then] why not?

Roz thinks that grape variety and label are key cues which prompt her choice 'if they're in the price range you want'. Price here acts not so much as an immediate prompt but as a precursor, setting the boundaries for what may be purchased. Price thus sets the parameters within which other factors then operate.

The situation where price does act as a direct prompt to purchase, rather than by setting the boundaries for selection, is when it is manipulated as part of a sales policy – that is, when wine is 'on special'. Thus:

Philip (UC, high-involvement): [It] also depends on the deal too, I think, from the retailer. You might say 'I love 389 but I'm not going to pay over the odds'. You see it on special, for \$5 off - and you go 'great I'll grab a case'. So I think you get conditioned to wait for the deal.

Philip refers to Penfold's Bin 389, a well-regarded red wine with perceived ageing ability. It is a product he seems to buy regularly, but the immediate spur to purchase is when he sees it discounted. A number of other informants also seemed to utilise price as a direct cue in this situation, including professionals.

### **3.4.2 *Scepticism about price as a cue***

Some of informants expressed a level of caution about the use of price as a cue.

Ursula (BC, low-involvement): It's nothing to do with price or label, to me it's to do with you try it - and you think 'gee, this is lovely.'

Ursula denies the relationship of price to quality. For her quality is all about subjective assessment of what is in the glass. This caution found support amongst some higher-involvement consumers and professionals:

Philip (UC, high-involvement): I've had excellent wine at a very good price. I've had very expensive but I've been very disappointed.

Richard (winemaker): Price, I suspect, is more about position than anything. I don't believe there is a hard-and-fast relationship between price and quality. I think, in general trends, the more you spend [then] - in a classical quality sense - the better the wine is likely to be.

Philip was noted above using price as a cue and Richard accepted here the price/quality relationship – but both have concerns about it. In Richard's case, those concerns are developed with the suggestion that price is more of a marketing construct than a precise indicator of quality. In fact it can be suggested from Philip's comment that good value is obtained when price is least effective as a cue – for then price is low relative to 'real' quality.

### **3.4.3 *Equating price to quality***

There was a perspective amongst a few informants that price and quality have a direct relationship – that they may even be identical. Thus, when asked what quality is, one focus group participant responded:

Ben (BC, low-involvement): To me it's not much more than the money that you pay for it and I don't pay too much attention.

Ben is a drinker of cheap wines, with a fairly jaundiced view about the snobbery and cant surrounding the product. For him quality – a concept he disdains - and price are identical, and he is fairly derogatory about the whole relationship. This direct correlation of price with quality was a perspective of some low- and medium-involvement consumers.

#### **3.4.4 *The symbolic function of price***

Price acts not just as a cue for consumers, but also as a means of dialogue. In this way it functions very much as scoring wine with points may do. It gives an instant, quantitative value to wine, which allows information about where it sits in a hierarchy of quality to be conveyed easily. Consider the comments during a SC focus group which was discussing the appearance of wine:

Nell (low-involvement): Some white wines sometimes can look a bit pale - and that can be a bit off putting sometimes. Or if they're bright yellow.

Helena (low-involvement): Yeah.

Nell: Somewhere in the middle seems to be more appealing.

Some others: [Express dissent].

Louis (low-involvement): I never noticed that.

Sue (medium-involvement): Probably \$8 stuff.

Nell and Helena think that wines which are too pale or too deeply coloured are less enticing than moderately deep hues. Others, explicitly Louis, disagree and, in support of Louis, Sue suggests that the wines Nell is referring to are 'probably \$8 stuff' (this is a group which tends to spend \$10-15 per bottle). Sue's comment is designed to disparage the kind of wines upon which Nell bases her judgment. However, the way in which she does it is by attaching a price marker to convey instantly the kind of quality one might expect in the wine.

Interpreting and using this semiotic role of price may be important for wine professionals. During the following interview with a sommelier discussion turned to the interpretation of consumers' wine language:

Belinda: I can be guided from what they're telling me. And the price points ... Quality for them - as a big fat businessman, with the big red nose, who's talking Barossa shiraz. I've got to take the lead - and guide him with my experience. It might not be a wine that I want to drink. He's given me the parameters that he wants to talk quality about .... I would be guarded when talking to customers about wine and quality ... We wouldn't be pouring anything that we don't perceive as quality - but it is driven by where they want to go on the list pricewise. So it is an indicator, yes ... Yeah, you don't want to say to the man who wants to spend \$25 'have Chateau de Sancerre at \$50' because he'll perceive that you've ripped him off. You've taken him out of his comfort zone pocketwise ... You've got to be very intuitive about who your customer is.

Belinda, as a professional with a firm conviction of her own ability to judge the quality of wine, has already explained that for her price and quality do not have a direct relationship. However, she was aware that for her customers price and quality are related. Belinda dislikes Barossa shiraz - a dislike which she projects onto the physical appearance of her putative customer. However, she would work with the customer within the quality parameters that he set – which are symbolised by price. In this case – unlike the comment of Sue above – price may not be mentioned explicitly in the dialogue between sommelier and consumer, but in Belinda's perspective the names of the wines become a symbol for price, and price is the index for the quality.

### **3.5 Value**

As suggested in the literature review, the relationship of quality, price, sacrifice and value is complex. Value was important to almost all informants. There were broadly two consumer perspectives. One sees value and quality as being identical, the other, more widely held view, sees them as related but distinct.

#### ***3.5.1 Equating value with quality***

An example of the idea that value and price are the same came from a multiple BC interview:

Ian (BC, low-involvement): Quality for me is value for money, but that's just the way I think.

[sometime later]

Ian: There's a mate of mine ... and he was financial controller for the largest family owned wine company at one time. He understands wines and so on. You go round to his place and he'll buy a red for \$9.99. He can afford the other end of the scale too - but \$9 for what it is it's like having fish and chips, it just suits the occasion ... Why spend \$100 on a bottle when you can have this for \$9? So you talk about quality or is that - oh yes it's value for money!

Ian (again using price as a symbol for purported quality) notes the behaviour of an 'expert' on wine, who 'knows' that price is irrelevant and therefore quality is irrelevant to the product. Thus, if you talk about wine quality you really mean value for money. A few others shared this perspective that quality equates to value.

### 3.5.2 *Where quality and value are distinct*

The alternative view – that quality and value are distinct albeit closely linked – was more widely held by informants across all levels of involvement. In this context price operated not so much to symbolise quality but as a marker of sacrifice, and value is seen to mediate between quality and that sacrifice (Teas & Agarwal, 2000). Thus, in a SC focus group, there was discussion about what prompts a specific purchase:

Hetty (low-involvement): It's the value for money - a decent wine for a good price.

Alison (medium-involvement): Sometimes that's questionable. You get equally nice wine for less price.

Hetty: No, but that's what I'm saying actually.

Alison and Hetty are in effect looking for the same thing – good quality at an acceptable price, where ‘acceptable’ is as low as reasonable for the wine. Alison notes that two wines can be ‘equally nice’, thus of equivalent quality, but their value may vary. Quality and value are not the same. At this point the quality/value relationship shades into relative quality. Quality may exist in different grades, relative to how much one pays for the wine.

Although value for money was considered important by a range of reference groups, it was referred to particularly often by three categories: the low- and medium-involvement consumers and the mediators. Higher involvement consumers often showed a concern for value – but it was, perhaps, less consistently important. In response to a comment about the importance of value in a focus group, one UC commented:

Philip (high-involvement): Oh, I don't know. Sometimes it's nice to think ‘Jeez I paid a lot for that. I really went to the doctor - and I'll enjoy it.’

There are times, Philip considers, when it is enjoyable to ignore considerations of value, buy an expensive wine, and just enjoy it, whatever it cost.

Value was also especially important to mediators:

Jeff: I think if you looked at Margaret River ... that you would find examples, down there, of wines at quite high price points which I think justify those prices. They're probably world class, the leading

examples down there. But, I think, you'd find as many examples of wines that are overpriced for what you get.

Margaret River wines can be expensive. For Jeff the overall price was less important than whether a wine merited the price – and he felt that not all wines from Margaret River do. Many other mediators mirrored this focus on value – no doubt because their job concentrates on persuading consumers that a wine is worth its price whatever that price level may be. Often when mediators discussed value it was less in relation to their own consumption and more to do with consumers.

### **3.6 Summary: Cues, price and value.**

As expected, cues appear to be important in marking the likely quality of a wine. Appearance, an intrinsic cue, is essential to this, but beyond the bald distinction of red or white, only operates with precision at the time of consumption (when the wine is poured into the glass). Other cues may be relevant at the point of purchase including the name of the winemaker, and the regional (as opposed to national) origin of the product. Price is also critical but its operation goes beyond being a mere 'quality signal'. Crucially it may act as a symbol or marker of wine quality, and as a means of dialogue about the product. For a few, however, price has nothing to do with quality. Value likewise has a close but indistinct relationship to wine quality. For a very few the two concepts are identical but for most they are linked yet separate.

## **4 The situation of consumption**

Informants were asked if the situation of consumption affected their ability to taste wine. Two issues seemed to emerge as relevant: the environment of consumption and the role of food.

### **4.1 Environment**

During data collection informants were regularly asked about the impact of the wine consumption environment on their evaluation of its quality. Many acknowledged that there was a relationship. This was succinctly dealt with in one PR focus group:



Gemma: [Evaluation is] much easier [in a formal tasting]. If you're in a social context, and you've got perfume left, right and centre, and you've got conversations that are all over the shop - and there's ... emotional surroundings - I think it becomes hard to judge wine properly.

The distractions may be physical (perfume – unacceptable in the professional tasting environment), social, or emotional. All of these may interfere with one's ability to assess wine.

Generally informants who accepted that situation had an impact on evaluation acknowledged that it was not the quality of the wine that varied from situation to situation, merely their ability to evaluate it. Some, however, went further. Sean attends advanced wine appreciation classes:

Sean (UC, high-involvement): Also [it] depends where you are, or what situation you're in. If you're over at a friend's house, having a barbecue - and they know a bit about wine - you'll pour a glass. And you might like to have a sniff and a bit of a taste - and say 'what do you reckon to that one?' And basically if you don't screw your face up it's nice drinking. Well that's a quality wine in the situation that you're in. Come into the classroom and we're being more critical. We're ... trying to assess the wine - and we're trying to decide whether it is quality wine or not, as well as the varietal, where it comes from - and all that sort of thing. So I generally tend to tailor what I think is quality to wherever I am.

Sean – who elsewhere expressed subjective views of wine quality (that it is a matter of personal taste) – maintained consistency with the subjectivist perspective. He argued that it is not that the situation has an impact on the taster's evaluative skills but rather that the perceived quality of the wine itself varies from situation to situation. A few other drinkers with a subjective viewpoint also took this more extreme perspective.

Focus group participants were explicitly asked about their response to the rather clinical research environment as a forum for wine tasting. Views differed, as one focus group showed:

Frank (SC, low-involvement): I find wine tasting like this is harder. I can't actually tell whether I like the wine. A few weeks ago I went to a wine tasting - and at the end of the evening counted the wines that I liked - and bought them. And now I taste them they're awful ... When you do a tasting like this the flavours all kind of got a bit confused, I couldn't tell that this is a wine I would actually like to drink in future

...

Cleo (SC, medium-involvement): I've got the completely opposite opinion. Because when I'm drinking with friends I ... love to talk. So I'm talking, I'm eating, I'm usually cooking. And even after the first sip ... I know I'll enjoy [it] - but I'm not thinking about it. When I'm doing a tasting I'm concentrating on that and thinking about it.

Frank repeated a concern at 'the confusion of flavours' which has already been noted as a problem for other informants. On the other hand Cleo finds the social disturbance of drinking with friends too intrusive, and so – for assessment, if not for drinking - prefers a clinical environment where she is allowed to taste in quiet without distracting smells, jobs or conversations.

The perspective that environment does have an impact on evaluation (or even on quality) was widely held – but not universally so.

Neil (BC, low-involvement): I've had the same wine. And I've had it with ladies or mates and then I'll be in the work shed and will have it out of just little glasses ... and it's like 'this is all right.' This is my favourite white wine ... and I still find that the wine is still the same.

If a wine is good, Neil avers, then it is good whatever the situation. This view was accepted by some informants, including some higher involvement ones.

Nevertheless the general view, including that of experienced show judges, seemed to be that human evaluation is not a finely calibrated, invariably reproducible activity.

Thus it seems generally accepted that situation confuses the assessment of quality. What is already conceptually complicated, clouded by linguistic difficulties and subject to physiological variability is made harder by the place and company which may surround the process.

## **4.2 The role of food**

In the context of the situational impact on the assessment of wine, food was mentioned by more informants than any other issue. Thus, talking about tasting within a focus group:

Greg (ME): I sometimes think ... you get a little bit more from certain wines when they're exposed with a bit of food. So, while you've got a controlled environment here, if you've got the ability to look at something, some wines really come into their own with a bit of food. And they open up and they evolve etcetera. They evolve in the glass with time. There's still quite a lot of variables in there. A structured, controlled environment's the best.

Greg was maintaining a paradox. As a professional he could not formally acknowledge that any environment other than a formal tasting is best for evaluating wine, and yet some wines do not shine in that situation. Wines may evolve alongside food and offer more to the drinker – though he did not finally say that their quality improves.

Others were prepared to adopt the position that food may vary wine quality. What follows is from a focus group, commenting on the wines that have been tasted, and how they might be alongside food:

Leo (UC, high-involvement): If you had oysters with the first two and then steak with the second two they'd taste quite different. But you couldn't have steak with these two [*points to the sparkling wines*]. [With] the first two ... the complexity will come out a little bit more once you have something with it and you'll evaluate it quite differently.

Food will modify how wine tastes, an uncontroversial comment, and the match (balance) of food and wine is important, so that Leo did not believe that one could eat steak with sparkling wine. Additionally, Leo claimed, food allows some of the catalytic dimensions of quality such as complexity to show more clearly, resulting in a rather different evaluation of wine. The implication is that this is a positive outcome.

## **5 The process of quality evaluation**

Whilst quality cues relate temporally to the period before consumption other factors affect consumption itself. These latter include approaches to evaluation – the psychophysical stance taken by the drinker at consumption – as well as the formal methods adopted to taste and to drink. Additionally, there are some specific aspects of evaluation used by professionals which are of interest. All of these will be explored below.

## 5.1 Approaches to evaluation

The way that wine drinkers approach<sup>3</sup> their consumption of the product is a complex topic. At the risk of over-simplification, however, one can categorise drinker-response to consumption as being sensory, cognitive or affective. These three approaches interact, so, for instance, what may initially be sensate quickly becomes mentally evaluated and then creates an emotional state in the drinker. Nevertheless, just as aestheticians may consider that the subject matter of their discipline is essentially either a mental or an emotional process (Dickie, 1971; Townsend, 1997) or, as some psychologists have argued, it is essentially sensate (Funch, 1997), so respondents placed varying emphasis on the different possible approaches to consumption. For clarity one can separate these approaches by suggesting that the sensory response is ‘I taste’, the cognitive is ‘I think’ and the affective is ‘I like (dislike)’. The process of using tasting as part of the focus groups was particularly useful as a tool to examine the varying approaches. It allowed observation of the participants’ immediate reactions to the wine, rather than merely asking them which approach was more important for them.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of density of response both the cognitive and the sensory approaches appeared to be most important, with informants focusing marginally more often on cognitive approaches. As will be seen, affective responses tended to appear subsequent to the other approaches.

### 5.1.1 *The cognitive approach*

Informants who utilised the cognitive approach to wine tasting tended to analyse the wine tasted during the focus groups in some detail. In the following,

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<sup>3</sup> The term approach has been adopted here in deliberate contrast to ‘attitude’. Although two elements of this perspective – cognition and affect – are similar to terms used in attitude theory it is important to note that this discussion is focusing on the psychophysical stance taken by those using wine, rather than as a precursor to a general purchase decision. Conation is not an issue in this discussion.

<sup>4</sup> It is necessary to note that physiologically sensation must temporally precede both thought and emotion. However, with some informants it seemed clear that sensation was momentary, and quickly superseded by thought or emotion. At other times, or for other informants, the sensory experience was experienced as more than a momentary event.

taken from an UC focus group, Siobhan is trying to decide which wine she prefers – number two (one of the sparkling wines) or number four (the red wine):

Siobhan (medium-involvement): I think it's a tough call for me between [wine] two and [wine] four. I agree [with the last speaker], I think the bubbles [in wine two] are quite nice - it's quite fine. And probably just a little bit sweeter, I think, than the first one. Length a bit longer, a bit more complex. I like number four because it's quite a smooth wine. I think it's quite balanced - nothing really sticks out ... It's got a moderate length and I quite liked it for that. You know it's not particularly full bodied. But I thought number three was very interesting - I'd actually quite like you to tell me what it is.

Siobhan initially contrasts the two sparkling wines. This is an analytic process, so that rather than expressing mere preference, or relying on taste sensations alone, she implies that wine two has finer bubbles, and then comments that it is longer, more complex, and sweeter. She then moves onto her other main preference. Wine four, she claims, is balanced, smooth and moderately long. She has to think hard about this particular comparison, as she is comparing two unlike wines – sparkling with red – and at this point she fails to reach a conclusion. She also makes an aside about wine three (the white wine), using the term ‘interesting’ – again a very cognitive approach to a wine which raised strong feelings during most of the tastings. Her primary emphasis is therefore on thinking, on precise verbal description and on the mental analysis of how she perceives the wines.

The cognitive approach to drinking seemed to be especially important for medium- and high-involvement drinkers; it was an approach based on experience and the ability to analyse wines. MEs, particularly, seemed to place emphasis on the primacy of the cognitive approach:

Lesley (ME): Yes, with wine I'm very analytical - until I've analysed it in my mind and then I'll enjoy it. But once again, I really do [this] because I choose to be in this industry. And I find it fascinating analysing wines - and working out what I like and what I don't and once I've done that I'll enjoy [it].

Lesley is explicit that for her analysis (cognitive) precedes enjoyment (affective) – and much of the enjoyment springs out of the process of analysis itself. She sees this as an industry-related approach, which it may be, although as the quotation from Siobhan shows it is not limited to wine professionals.

### **5.1.2 *The sensory approach***

The sensory approach to tasting featured an instinctive, physiological response to the wines. There was an immediate sense of enjoyment, using both visual and organoleptic sensations, with very little analysis of the wine. This approach was more generally adopted by low- and medium-involvement consumers – although not exclusively so, as the following extract suggests:

Neville (ME): For me it's the red [wine]. I'm not sure what causes it - but it's the attractive fruit characters. And I smell the other wines they smell – well - yeasty, citrusy or whatever. But wine four is a wine that I really like. It's almost like everything else just floats away it's lovely. Focus on it - it's almost like an intoxicating aroma - it's, you know, any better and your eyes roll back a bit - it makes you really focus on it.

Neville – speaking in a group of professionals – displays some of the cognitive approach in what he says, describing fruit characters. But critically, with wine four, it is attractive (showing an element of beauty), it transports him, and he finds it intoxicating. This seems to display some of the elements of a deeply felt and profound aesthetic experience and mirrors the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). The focus is very much on the sensation the wine produces, rather than detailed analysis of its structure or aroma. On the occasions when professionals did focus more on the sensory rather than the cognitive response it tended to be in reference to wines which gave them a ‘profound hedonic experience’.

### **5.1.3 *The affective approach***

Whereas sensation is about the immediate physiological response to the wine, affect relates to the emotional response. They can be hard to separate – but the two approaches did seem to operate distinctly for some informants. The affective response often – though not invariably - seemed to be less immediate than either the cognitive or the sensory, but it did appear to have a reinforcing role for each. Thus liking/disliking can be viewed as the end result of both sensory stimulation and/or the cognitive analysis of a wine. Those informants who primarily showed an affective response to a wine were generally to the point, as this, from a PR focus group, suggests:

Gemma: I like the first [wine] best. Ah what does it do for me? I like it because it's got some great length and it hasn't got any disjointed edges. And out of these I think each of the other wines has got an edge to it that I don't like, or a degree of balance they're out of balance - in my mind. And I think it's a really good example of its type.

Aaron: I think they're all pretty good examples of their styles in wine. I like them all. But at this moment in time I'm pretty keen to jump into pinot rather than fizz. I quite liked the last one just because it's soft, and got some very good lift, and aromatics, and balance. But there's not one I objected to. They are all pretty good wines.

Gemma talks about her preference in terms of like/dislike – her immediate response when asked about the wines. She goes on to justify it using an analytical approach. A key point to note about affective responses is that they were very closely followed by a cognitive and/or sensory justification. Aaron likes another wine best – and his response reveals an important point about affective responses to wine – that they are often closely related to the situation of consumption. This focus group happened at a time when Aaron was keen to drink ('jump into') pinot noir (which is what the fourth wine was) rather than sparkling wine – which was Gemma's preference. Regularly when drinkers talked about liking/disliking there was a relationship to their mood, environment or the time of day when they were tasting.

One other important point to make about affective responses is that they often related to disliking, rather than liking. Immediate sensory responses and usually cognitive ones also, were about positive evaluation of the wine. Disliking however appeared nearly as much as liking within the affective approach, perhaps because aesthetic products tend to provoke strong feelings, whether for or against. The third wine in the tastings regularly provoked strong responses:

Ellie (BC, medium-involvement): [Points to wine no. three.] This one sort of tasted... [*she grimaces.*] I know it's a style thing. It's like drinking Brussels sprouts, it was very green.

George (BC low-involvement): I don't want to know how you drink Brussels sprouts. But I actually agree with that as well.

SJC: Was that bad drinking Brussels sprouts?

Ellie: ...I don't like Brussels sprouts to begin with.

Ellie is not so much analysing the wine as using green vegetables as a metaphor for her disgust with the wine. Certain focus group participants found it easier to point out a wine which they disliked than to choose the wine which they responded most

positively to. Indeed, wine number three seemed to act dichotomously. Those (the majority) who disliked it, were very affective in their response. Those who had positive views about it were much more cognitive.

#### ***5.1.4 The interaction of the approaches***

As will have become quite clear, cognition, sensation and affect in wine consumption do not operate in isolation. The initial cognitive response can lead very quickly to an emotional reaction (like/dislike). It may also, after analysis of the wine, produce a refined sensory response (which in turn feeds back into cognitive processes). An instant physiological reaction can, very quickly, both be analysed mentally (which often feeds back to the sensory response itself) and also lead speedily to a like/dislike feeling.

These different approaches would be used by consumers, often over an extended time in response to a wine – but on occasions in quick succession:

Henry (SC, low-involvement): The red I quite enjoyed. That had a nice spicy smell to it. And I thought it had a little bit of tannin to it, which I didn't mind. Just a nice warming red.

Henry starts – typically for a low-involvement drinker – with a sensory response – then shifts to a cognitive approach, which reinforces both the sensory and the affective at the end: ‘a nice, warming red.’

## **5.2 Methods of evaluation**

The standard professional method of evaluating wine is to assess sensory data given by the appearance, the aroma (‘nose’) and the taste (‘palate’ – which includes aromatic, taste and tactile sensations) of the wine, in that order (Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Schuster, 1992). The methods of quality evaluation of each informant were probed. All the professional respondents and many of the medium- and high-involvement consumers talked about the standard professional method for tasting, and this process is sufficiently well understood in the literature not to warrant further discussion here. However, other interesting issues arose from discussion about methods of tasting. These – which are examined below - include: whether or not one makes an instant evaluatory response; the use of benchmarks or systems to



evaluate wines; physical processes; and the impact of discrete or comparative tasting, that is, of tasting one wine on its own or a group of wines together.

### ***5.2.1 Instant response, template or system?***

Drinkers had two possible temporal responses in their evaluation of wine quality. One was to make an instant decision and the other was to make a considered decision. The instant response was explained by one consumer:

Simon (UC, high-involvement): I'm a very much first impressions man ... the impression of its quality is very much in that first sip. So the thing that sets my mind as to whether I can go back to a wine, or buy it in the future, is what that first sip out of the bottle is like.

As Simon makes clear, he tends to have an immediate evaluative perspective on the wine. It was evident from the wine tasting in the focus groups that other informants adopted a similar approach – although often they were of lower involvement levels (although this was an observed rather than a reported response). High-involvement consumers, and especially professionals, took much longer about the tasting before they were ready to reach any conclusions about the wines.

Where the decision was more considered, most informants tended to go through the sight-nose-palate method for tasting wine. However, specific quality evaluation has additional processes. For some professionals there may be a particular sequence of points that they look for, as this extract from a PR focus group suggests:

SJC: When you're tasting how do you evaluate the quality of wine?

Melissa: Fault free for a start.

Noel: Balance.

Clive: Me too. The presence of some desirable characters.

Jill: Complexity.

Vince: And length.

Melissa: Texture.

Jill: Structure.

Melissa started with the precondition for good wine – that it has no faults. The others then added a number of other features. The tone of the speakers made it clear that there tended to be general agreement amongst the participants that they accepted each others' suggestions. These thus seemed to act as a checklist of factors to be

observed in the wine when establishing its quality, and they have a close connection with the quality dimensions already categorised as the catalysts of quality (chapter 7, section 3.2.3).

Other informants, when asked about methods of quality evaluation, said less about checklists and instead suggested that a wine had to fit an ideal benchmark of its type. Thus:

Adam (BC, low-involvement): I think you always compare what you've enjoyed before. And two glasses of red or three glasses of red - you still think of that one that you really enjoyed and compare it, even though it might be a different brand.

Adam suggested that he assesses one wine against a good version of the same variety that he has had previously. As a low-involvement consumer he seems to keep a specific, named wine in his head as the ideal against which to judge his current drinking. More highly involved drinkers may not need that concrete experience:

Umberto (ME): So I tend ... to have an archetype. Or have a model ... that I employ, that's in my head, of what – say - a shiraz from the Barossa Valley should be like, with a good degree of flexibility on oakiness and alcohol levels and fruiting. And then [I] simply look for balance.

Umberto's model has some flexibility – it is not as absolute as the specific wine which Adam has drunk – nevertheless it is the benchmark against which Umberto judges his wines. He is a show judge, and as the following extract suggests that benchmark may not always operate as neatly as he would like:

Umberto: I judged a brandy class down in [wine show] this year. And I ... do a little bit of brandy tasting, not a lot. I actually got it pretty good, pretty right - and fortunately I was with a more experienced judge who knew what was going on ... Nonetheless you still have to think 'bloody hell I don't know what I'm looking at here.' You really have to reframe everything in your head and then your palate.

The problem with benchmarks (a point raised by other informants who used them), is that when faced with an unusual, infrequently consumed wine, one has no frame of reference against which to evaluate the wine. In Umberto's case brandy, rather than a specific wine, required him to readjust his perspective substantially. Other informants suggested that overseas wines could cause the same problem for some drinkers.

Whereas the checklist approach to evaluation seems to have a relationship to the gustatory, catalytic dimensions of quality, benchmarking has more connection to the paradigmatic dimensions, as it focuses on an ideal form against which the actual wine is compared. It is likely that for many drinkers both approaches operate in tandem. Umberto, talking about his benchmark of Barossa shiraz above, refers to flexibility and the need to see balance in the wine. Thus, having set a benchmark, his evaluative processes may also utilise some of the checklist approach to examine how precisely the wine he is drinking fits the archetype.

### **5.2.2 *Discrete and comparative evaluation***

Just as quality can be classified as (discrete) excellence or (comparative) superiority, so the evaluation of wines can be carried out as a discrete exercise, examining one wine in its own right or, as a comparative process, assessing a number of wines against each other. Informants were asked about which process they found easier, and the focus tastings also allowed for observation of the processes used as the two sparkling wines could be considered together, and the red and the white wine had to be evaluated discretely.

On balance, marginally more respondents seemed to prefer a comparative approach to wine evaluation:

Henry (SC, low-involvement): If you're assessing wines then I'd like a few of the same wines in front of me - just to compare. Ok - well this wine [points to wine four – the red wine] ... [I've] no other reference points. I'd look at it if it was the same as the cab sav or the shiraz I had last week. But when you pour - say - four or half a dozen, [and] look at them - and think 'oh that one looks like cherry or plum', or whatever - then that gives you a starting point. That's when you're comparing.

Henry said that he would attempt to evaluate the sole red wine he was tasting by comparing it with something he had had previously – but that it was much easier to compare a few similar wines as they offered reference points. This perspective was also shared by many of the high-involvement informants.

However, some informants felt happier being able to focus on one wine. For professionals this approach could be a matter of skill or a reflection of the need to be able to make quick decisions about a single wine when it was presented to them:

Tim (ME): I never compare. I'm happy to say that I've got to that level. And I think that's one of the hardest things.

Tim suggests that, although it is a difficult skill to master, an experienced professional needs to be able to focus on a wine in isolation. This view was mirrored by a few medium-involvement informants, though for different reasons. In the following extract Diana refers to the consumer wine appreciation course that she is doing:

Diana (SC, medium-involvement): I find this wine course - I'm really enjoying it - but tasting six wines each evening I get confused...

SJC: It's probably because you've drunk six wines by the end!

Diana: No. I'd rather stay with just one wine. And [at] the end of the bottle - if we're having it for dinner or whatever - we'll just say 'well that wasn't so great we won't buy that again'. Or we'll say 'yeah, that was good.'

Tasting six different wines can be fun for Diana – but confusing. One can engage her full concentration, and it is easier to reach a conclusion in that situation. The preference for discrete wine evaluation, whether from professional focus or a fear of confusion, tended to be a perspective of medium- and high-involvement drinkers only.

One comment, made by a few professionals, endorsed comparative tasting of a single wine at different times.

Jeff (ME, wine-distributor): The kind of thing that is really getting to me about tastings now is [that] you're really making an assessment of a wine based on one taste of it. And I think you really need to see wines more than once to get a real feel for where they're at so ... how well do you really know a wine when you're tasting it as a one off?

Others echoed this. A single taste, it was argued, perhaps in a fairly pressured environment, is no way to really understand and evaluate a wine.

### **5.2.3 *Show judging***

A number of informants expressed unprompted opinions about the operation of the Australian wine show system. As this is perceived to be one means of intrinsically classifying wine quality it seems pertinent to explore these perspectives.

Most of the comments made of the show system were made by professionals. Consumer perspectives on the process were not specifically investigated but the one

consumer comment on wine shows seemed to accept the validity (though not the usefulness) of what show judges do. A tentative conclusion from this general silence may therefore be that consumers tend not to question the accuracy of wine show results. Professionals were not necessarily so sanguine.

The point was made by a number of winemakers who were also show judges that one learns to distinguish quality evaluation from personal preference, as Richard has previously explained. He dislikes sparkling red wine, but has the ability and experience to judge it when required:

Richard: The modern, sparkling-red phenomenon has to be bloody sweet, oaky, tannic, very young. There are definitely gold medal wines amongst those sweet, oaky, very young, aggressive sort of lolly things. So I'd like to think I could judge a class of them. And give an appropriate gold medal to a wine that I would not choose to drink in a fit.

Richard can judge and award top medals to a wine that he would never choose to drink personally. For other winemakers this shows a lack of integrity, implied in the comments, recorded previously, of the winemaker Wendy. She has been noted suggesting that she would not award a gold medal to a wine which she would not choose to drink.

One professional observed that there is a likelihood that winemakers would tend to award their own wines medals.

Tom (winemaker): [Name] always says there is this argument within judging wines. Well, you're a judge and you're going to pick your own wines. Now subconsciously you are going to pick your own wines. And if you're not picking your own wines, then you don't know what your palate is, then you don't know what you're doing.

If you cannot pick your own wines in a show, Tom argued, then your palate is not fine-tuned enough and you do not actually understand what you should be doing as a winemaker. Wine shows are substantially judged by winemakers, often from large companies who tend to submit many entries to each show. If what Tom claims is accurate, it must undermine the supposed objectivity of wine show results, for in judging the winemakers will tend to select their own wines, if only because their own palate tells them that the wines are high quality. This view was not universally accepted. Others claimed that they tended to mark down their wines if they came across them in a wine show – suggesting that they would not agree with Tom that

one's own wines are recognisable. However, Tom's point is that one subconsciously recognises one's own wines – so the two views are not necessarily irreconcilable.

Some winemakers disliked the wines to which judges give the top awards. It is a complaint of the system that a large class – of, say, 150 young shiraz – is nearly impossible to assess effectively. Consequently judges mark up deep coloured, intensely aromatic, often oaky or sweet wines, which stand out immediately. Thus one winemaker commented:

Nick: The show [system] here has a ... problem with chardonnay. [It is] driven to go for higher and higher alcohols<sup>5</sup>. The wines tend to get a bit boring and flat - not our cup of tea. But still a lot of the consumers like it. And the show circuit tends to like it.

By implication Nick is criticising the show system, although this may actually be an unconscious explanation of why his wines tend to win few medals at shows.

One other professional – himself a show judge who generally enjoyed the experience – added another criticism:

Umberto (ME): I think probably the worst thing ... that happens in Australia ... is the show judging mentality. A style comes in for a particular period in the show system's history - and everybody applauds it, and everybody derides any wine style that doesn't conform to that particular stylistic idea. And I think that can have a very, very negative effect on ... consumer reaction to wine, because it can make some consumers feel a bit inferior, if you like, slightly patronised, because they like a particular style of wine which is no longer in vogue ... This pack - this herd – mentality, where groups tend to go after one particular wine style, rather than embracing the diversity of wine ... is potentially, I won't say damaging, but something which I don't think is particularly positive.

The show system, it can be argued, does tend to push for consensus (Croser, 2001) and perhaps places some social importance on consistency between judges. Thus it produces, so Umberto suggests, a herd mentality. This in turn creates particular fads in wine styles, which in turn may exclude the consumer who does not welcome the current fad. Umberto may over-emphasise the impact of wine shows on consumer perceptions – nevertheless the idea that the system is subject to passing fashion again throws some doubt on its validity.

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<sup>5</sup> Alcohol adds not merely warmth, but also body, smoothness and a sense of sweetness to wine.

#### 5.2.4 *Blind tasting*

A number of informants suggested that a wine could only be effectively evaluated if it were tasted without knowing what it was. Generally this was a view held by high-involvement drinkers, especially professionals – but this was not invariably the case:

Bella (BC, low-involvement): But I think you really have to taste something without any label on it to think whether you like it or not.

The danger of being overawed by reputation led Bella to conclude that she had to taste and judge a wine without seeing the label, in order to discover what she truly enjoyed. This, however, could be a more difficult process. One ME was asked about it:

Tim: Yes it is, I think, harder. I have to concentrate more ... Because I suppose - in honesty - tasting wine is usually ... like an exam style situation, or [a] competition. So I suppose there is more thought going into it.

One other interviewee, whilst supporting blind tasting, did sense a conflict about the practice:

Richard (PR): I believe staunchly in tasting things blind - and making my own mind up. It worries me - although I can understand from a hedonistic viewpoint - why [a wine writer] writes 'things should be tasted with the label - because otherwise you have a Romanee Conti which has cost you £500 and you drink it and you think it's a 14 point wine. And you've cheated yourself because - if you knew it was a Romanee Conti you'd enjoy it so much more.' That makes perfect sense in an economic sense - but that is not an objective assessment of quality. That's somebody trying to maximise the return on their investment. I think if people are going to be serious about saying 'I have an objective opinion on the quality of this wine' they have to taste it blind. They have to remove those filters of bottle shape, region, producer and even variety.

Richard is a consummate professional who supports blind tasting – but he did suggest that, if one had purchased an expensive bottle, it makes economic sense not to waste the experience by tasting it blind. Even more perhaps – though he only hints at this – there is a hedonistic argument for seeing the label of a great wine. Implicitly, maybe, he is suggesting that appreciative enjoyment of such a reputable wine may be as important as rigorous evaluation.

## 6 Conclusion

Evaluating quality is a difficult process. This is partly an issue of situation and the need for focus, but other issues also have an impact, such as the misinterpretation of language. Even where informants seemed to be (individually) clear about how they assess wine, it appeared evident that there were differences between informants about the processes adopted. This divergence was clear in the debate about whether knowledge and experience are prerequisites for engaging with quality, or anybody could evaluate a wine, whatever their level of familiarity with the product. There was also a possible divergence over the methods of evaluation – benchmarking or using a checklist, or possibly using both methods.

Inevitably the correlates of quality are an important precursor to its evaluation. Quality cues are critical in this, although they may have different roles before purchase compared with quality assessment at and following consumption. Situation is important as a precursor, and the relationship of food and wine is key in the context of situational influences.

Two key issues of interest arise which will require further consideration and will be addressed in subsequent chapters. The first is the impact of knowledge of wine on its assessment, and specifically whether consensus judgments about it can be reached, as suggested by some of the data. Second is the apparently varied psychophysical approaches used by informants. Varying informants were observed adopting cognitive, sensory or affective responses to wines. Further, some informants were observed to use distinct responses at different times. The way in which the psychophysical approach interacts with perspectives on quality and its evaluation could be important in understanding wine quality and possibly by extension aesthetic quality in general.



## **CHAPTER 9:**

### **WINE QUALITY: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

A number of key themes have permeated this study, recurring in the literature and throughout the presentation and interpretation of the data. These have included pleasure; personal taste and objectivity; experiential processes such as feeling and sensation; and thought. These key issues, and their interaction, will be evaluated within a theoretical context.

However, underpinning all else and thus dealt with first are two topics which permeated the findings. The first is the difficulty that consumers have when engaging with wine quality as an issue. This has been examined from the theorist's standpoint in the past, but not so much from the consumer's perspective. Additionally there is the whole question of involvement as it relates to quality. This study does not add substantially to the general literature on the topic of involvement but does apply our existing understanding to the issue of how people approach wine quality.

The focus of this study has been quality itself. What follows is an attempt to synthesise the findings of this study with the literature on the subject and to draw out some theoretical perspectives on wine and aesthetic quality. Thus the dimensions of wine quality are considered, categorised and compared with the current theoretical understanding of quality. The process of conceptualising wine quality is also explored, as is the way in which drinkers categorise wine quality. This exploration is undertaken in the light of the academic marketing focus on perceived quality and the aesthetic theory of the antinomy of taste. Although this is not a psychological study the psychophysical approaches that consumers take to wine drinking seem to have relevance for how its quality is perceived. Therefore this issue, not previously considered in the literature, is addressed. Finally a new model for the quality perception process in wine is suggested, and consideration is then given to the possibility of modifying that model and applying it to aesthetic products generally.

# 1 The difficulty of engaging with wine quality

It was noted in the literature review on the subject of quality that researchers find it a difficult concept to define and to engage with. This difficulty is in part a result of the multiple definitions of the concept and in part to do with its abstract nature. Consequently, it was noted, researchers themselves use varying ways of categorising and analysing quality, including a tendency to resort to perceived quality as a definition. This has two results. First it places onto the consumer the onus of determining what quality is. Second it makes the job of the marketing researcher simpler because they are absolved from the responsibility of defining quality. It becomes a process limited to recording, analysing and quantifying the consumer's perceptions of the quality dimensions of a product. This may be comparatively simple with consumer durables (for instance electrical goods (Sweeney & Soutar, 1995)), and even possible with service quality, using systems such as SERVQUAL, (Palmer, 1998; Parasuraman et al., 1988). However, it becomes more difficult with aesthetic products where the old saw *de gustibus non est disputandum*<sup>1</sup> is regularly used to pre-empt effective comparison or evaluation.

It is clear from the findings of this study that the academic difficulty in grappling with the concept of taste is mirrored by wine consumers. Both chapter 7 (the nature of wine quality) and chapter 8 (the assessment of wine quality) commenced with sections which noted, in some detail, the problems faced by drinkers in trying to conceptualise, analyse and evaluate quality in wine. Those problems existed not merely for consumers, but also for professionals and especially, it seemed, for some MEs who found difficulty in divorcing their ideas about quality from the consumer's perspective.

The difficulties faced by consumers appear to stem from a number of sources. In part, they share a common problem with academics in trying to define an abstract concept. This is compounded with a product like wine because of the fuzziness of its aesthetic nature (Amerine & Roessler, 1976) which is harder to engage with than, say, the speed and fuel consumption of a car. The suggestion has therefore been

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<sup>1</sup> 'There can be no debate about matters of taste'.

made that, for wine, quality 'is much easier to recognize than define' (Amerine & Roessler, 1976 p. 2).

This study found that this conceptual difficulty is further compounded because of the problem drinkers face with the language of tasting. To a certain extent this stems from the well-established fact that people categorise tastes by aroma and flavour, rather than by words (Engen, 1987; Lawless, 1985). At the same time, based on this study, many drinkers seem to object when a specific language of wine is developed. They may see it as jargon, designed to exclude the general public from understanding the product. Where language is used one word may have a variable meaning for different drinkers (as noted in the discussion on smoothness).

The difficulty of pinning down the nature of quality means that its correlates, and specifically its cues, may get confused with quality itself. This was observed in passing in the discussion on the relativist conceptualisation of wine but also specifically in the discussion on the dimensions of wine quality. Thus, for example, appearance seems to be used by some consumers as a quality dimension and a few also equate quality to value. It may be easier for consumers to pin quality onto the 'lower level', more concrete aspects of a wine than the higher-level more abstract dimensions.

None of this is altogether surprising. What is surprising however is that whilst researchers have spent some time noting the difficulty that they may have understanding quality, they have paid little attention to the difficulties that the consumer has with the idea. The fact that it is hard for consumers to get to grips with and explain quality, at least in relation to an aesthetic product like wine, makes any conclusions about the nature of wine quality doubly tentative.

## **2 Involvement**

A theme which has run through the findings of this study is the relevance of involvement to the understanding of wine quality. As noted in the literature review there have been some studies which have indirectly linked involvement to perceived quality. The linking factor may be price (Bloch, 1986; Lichtenstein et al., 1988), cues (Lee & Lou, 1995/96; Zaichkowsky, 1988) or attribute ranking (Quester &

Smart, 1998). However there has been little to connect involvement and quality directly and nothing which links involvement and the perceived quality of wine. The findings of this study tend to suggest that there are differences in the way that wine drinkers approach the product; for instance that high-involvement drinkers have a tendency to focus more on interest and complexity than the less involved. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the key distinction this study makes between drinkers is about involvement level, so that the most highly involved consumers seemed to have much more in common with professionals than they did with low-involvement consumers. This study indicates that it is more appropriate to differentiate between drinkers' involvement levels rather than distinguishing between professionals and consumers (although those differences did exist, as they also existed between mediators and producers). Thus, when it comes to the conceptualisation of wine quality, high- and medium-involvement consumers appear more likely to agree with professionals that quality is objective than are low-involvement consumers. However, it also seems that all levels of involvement are just as likely to take a subjectivist approach.

With the dimensions of wine quality, all involvement levels considered pleasure and enjoyment important, and all seemed to have equal regard for the importance of production processes (although the sub-dimension of consistency in wine appeared relevant to low-involvement drinkers only). On the other hand, the significance of grape quality as a dimension tended to be an issue for the more highly involved. Additionally, high-involvement drinkers seemed more likely to consider ageing potential and the paradigmatic dimensions as important. The latter particularly applied to the relevance of the vineyard of origin, which professionals especially considered important, although even medium-involvement drinkers might concur with this. Low- and medium-involvement drinkers seemed more likely to consider appearance a quality dimension.

The sub-dimensions of gustatory wine quality also offer some interesting contrasts. Length and body seemed equally important to all drinkers. Taste and smoothness were noted as concerns primarily by the medium- and low-involvement drinkers (though the caveats have been made that taste may be 'taken as read' by high-involvement drinkers, and smoothness may be similar to the sub-dimensions of balance, body or texture). Crucially, high-involvement drinkers were apparently

more likely to see complexity, interest and distinctiveness (and possibly balance) as being important, and low-involvement consumers seemed more likely explicitly to disagree that distinctiveness is a sub-dimension of wine quality.

It has been argued that involvement operates as either high/low and not on a continuum (Rossiter et al., 1991), although others disagree with this view (Brennan & Mavondo, 2000). The evidence of this study suggests that there is at least a medium level of involvement, and probably that a continuum does operate. Those who were classified as medium-involvement shared some high-involvement perspectives on wine quality, especially the more cognitive dimensions such as complexity and interest. At the same time they also adopted some of the more sensory dimensions which were important to low-involvement consumers, especially appearance and taste. Uniquely they gave the impression of placing more reliance on the influence of gatekeepers in the process of quality evaluation than the other two categories. Nevertheless, whilst interpreting the data from these informants there was a sense that they were people who tended to be in transit. They seemed to be those who were gaining more of an interest in wine (embarking on wine courses, for instance, or beginning to visit wineries), or they had come into contact with wine professionals who had engaged them more with the product. It may be that, as a group, they were in a trajectory which was tending to take them to a high-involvement level. Often it could be sensed that with more time, or more money, that is where they would end. To this extent the research showed some limited correspondence with the work of Quester and Smart (1998) linking high-involvement to age and income.

Involvement also appeared relevant to the way the aesthetic nature of wine was viewed. All informants seemed just as likely to see the consumption of wine and the consumption of music as similar, and all considered pleasure and evaluatory processes to be significant evidence of this link. However, high-involvement consumers seemed more likely to articulate some type of 'profound aesthetic experience' with wine. They also apparently placed more emphasis on the exploratory, challenging and cognitive elements of the aesthetic engagement. Moderately involved consumers concurred with the highly involved on that latter issue, but also shared the low-involvement focus on personal taste as a key factor uniting the experience of wine and music.

Differences between the categories also emerged from their processes of assessing wine quality. All seemed to place emphasis on cues and to consider situation important as an influence on evaluation. However, observation in focus groups suggested that the highly involved appeared more likely to use cognitive approaches to wine assessment. In other words they used terms such as ‘I think ...’ more often during the analysis of the wines tasted, and they used terms such as complexity or interest more often as dimensions of quality. This accords with previous research which suggests that low-involvement drinkers are likely to be less cognitive in their approach to the correlates of wine quality (Lockshin & Spawton, 2001). The more highly involved tended to consider appearance a cue to quality, whereas some low-involvement consumers were more likely to view it as an absolute and direct indicator of quality.

### **3 Personal taste**

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘taste’ was often perceived to have an objective or quasi-objective existence (Schaper, 1983). However, from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the philosophical notion that aesthetic taste was objective was in decline; instead it was increasingly seen as a personal perspective (Dickie, 1997), a perspective reflected by consumers of aesthetic products also (Bayley, 1991). The marketing literature tends not to focus too closely on the concept of personal taste. Nevertheless, the term has been referred to by informants regularly throughout this study. It is a tenet of marketing education that consumers are all different, with varying demographic, socio-cultural, psychographic and values-based backgrounds. Additionally, within the marketing literature there are allusions to taste whenever aesthetics are addressed. Thus Garvin (1987), for instance, says that it is hard to satisfy everyone in the dimension of aesthetic quality. Furthermore the subjective nature of perceived quality allows for personal factors such as taste to be an influence on the quality evaluation process. However, personal taste is not generally developed as a factor in its own right. A recent, rare example was offered by Wong and Ahuvia (1998), and even they took the concept of personal taste as a given without exploring its nature. On the other hand, from a formalised wine-tasting perspective, differences in personal taste in wine have been recognised (Jackson,

2002). These are perceived to be determined by both physiological and cultural factors (Jackson, 2002).

As this study makes clear, personal taste seems to be perceived by informants to interact closely with quality, whether or not it actually equates to it. This was initially raised by informants indirectly as an issue of motivation. Enjoyment is linked closely to flavour and thus to personal taste. The relevance of personal taste became more important when aesthetics was discussed. One of the reasons why some informants saw parallels between wine and music is that personal taste is a key precursor to preference in both. This may not mean that the qualitative evaluation of these products is entirely subjective. Nevertheless, personal taste is apparently one of the correlates which will inform that evaluation.

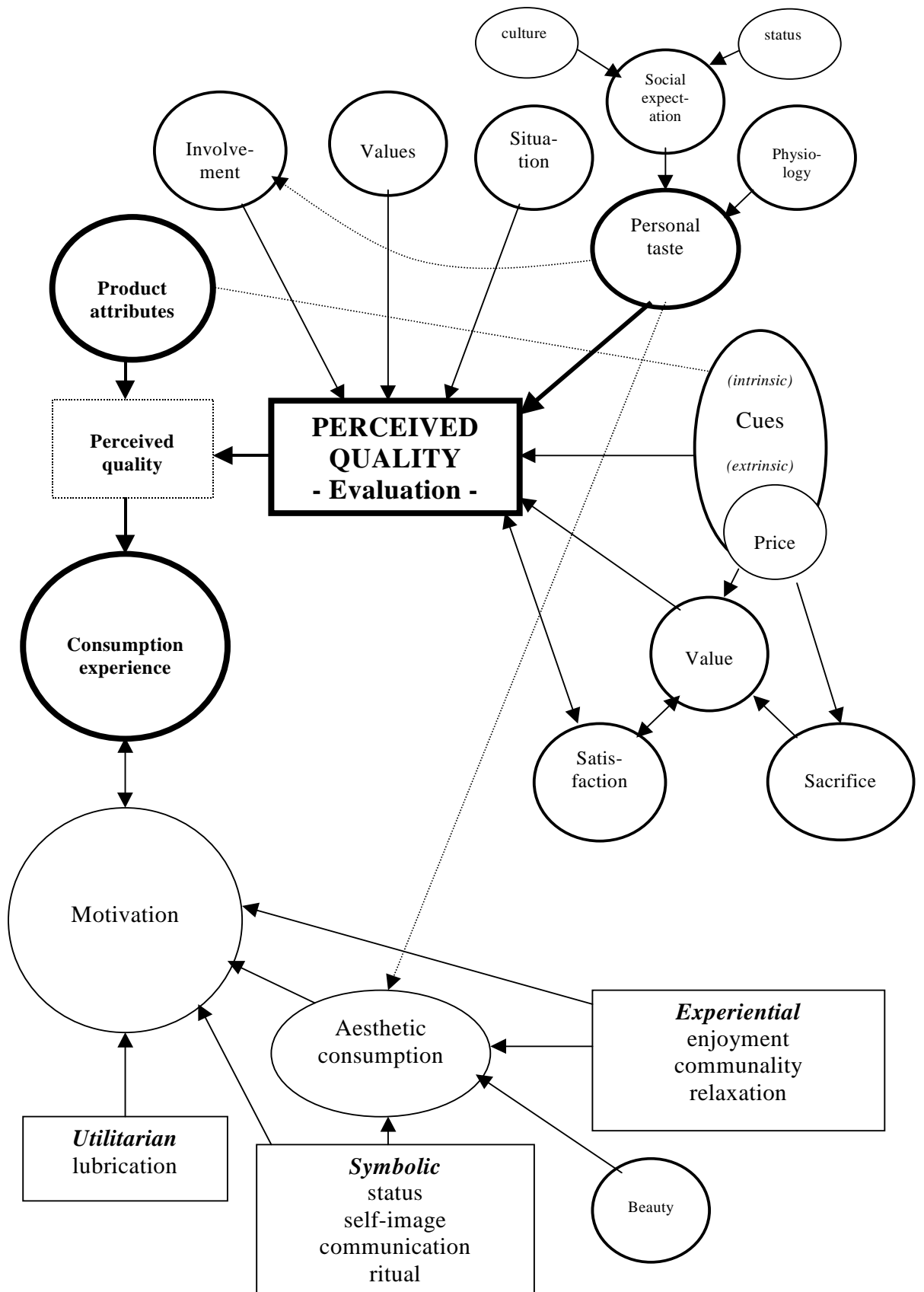
When dealing with aesthetic products, therefore, it may be accurate to view personal taste as one of the precursors to quality, and the model of perceived wine quality offered previously (figure 3.2) can be modified slightly to take account of this (see figure 9.1). In this revised model, personal taste becomes a correlate of the quality engagement process, having an indirect link to motivation. Specifically in wine, for instance, one can note the effect of the synthesis of physical characteristics (the physiological taste of the product) with social and cultural influences. This has been observed in the academic literature on the subject, and was addressed in one analysis of food preference:

Sweetness seemed to be a major driver of preference with sweeter products preferred in blind tests but when asked for descriptor preferences sweetness was often a negative (Wright, Nancarrow, & Brace, 2000 p. 433).

Often a sweet tooth is repressed in the interests of social acceptance and acquiring cultural capital. It may be that this partly explains the demise of Liebfraumilch<sup>2</sup> and similar sweet wines. With growing sophistication in wine drinkers in the UK, such varieties offer little cultural capital and so consumers who quite like the taste move on to other wines with more kudos (Wright et al., 2000 p. 436).

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<sup>2</sup> A fairly cheap, floral and slightly sweet German wine popular in the UK from the 1960s until the early 1990s and still with a limited following.



**Figure 9.1 - Perceived wine quality: a revised model**



Consumers may physiologically tend to enjoy sweeter wines, but socially be required to express a preference for wines with less residual sugar in them. In this case the physical and the social influences act dialectically to produce a synthesis of personal taste, which will be distinct for each individual.

In developing the notion of personal taste as a correlate of wine quality three further suggestions can be made. First, personal taste has a close relationship with involvement (as noted in chapter 3, section 4.4) and also tends to lead to greater experience with favoured products. A greater understanding of a favoured product type will inevitably have an impact on one's evaluative skills (Oude Ophuis & van Trijp, 1995). It will make them more finely honed, yet at the same time rooted in subjective experience. Thus high involvement may stem from personal taste but also reinforce and modify it. Second, another characteristic of the consumer which will have an impact on personal taste is the consumer's own predisposition to focus on cognitive, sensory or affective messages in approaching products (see section 6 below). Third is the impact of cultural background on the consumer's response to the situation of wine consumption. This has been researched previously and it was noted that culture has an impact on wine consumption patterns (Hall et al., 1997). One can extrapolate from this to suggest that personal taste in wine, and therefore one's particular approach to the evaluation of its quality, will have an ethnic and cultural dimension, a point supported by research in Sweden (Nerlove, 1995).

In conclusion it can be suggested, as is implicit in the quotation from Wright et al. above, that personal taste as a correlate of quality mediates other factors with the individual's assessment of product quality. Thus the revised model of the perceived wine quality engagement (figure 9.1) shows this mediating function. It is suggested that personal taste links closely to involvement. Additionally it mediates cultural, physiological and social precursors to the process of quality engagement with a product. It also links to aesthetic consumption and thus to the symbolic and experiential purposes of consumption. It is suggested therefore that personal taste is effectively one of the main ways in which the engagement with quality connects to symbolic and experiential consumption.

The concept of personal taste, an idiosyncratic dynamic, may seem at odds with another suggestion from the findings – that there may be some consensus in the

qualitative evaluation of a wine across all ranges and backgrounds of drinkers. There is not necessarily a conflict, however. First personal taste seems driven by both social and physiological factors, both of which may tend towards producing a common (though not identical) response to an aesthetic product like wine. Second personal taste is merely one variable in the creation of quality engagement with a wine. Whilst it may tend to push the drinker in a very individual direction some of the other correlates of quality may have a propensity to lead the drinker towards a response which shares more in common with other consumers.

#### **4 The dimensions of wine quality**

Steenkamp (1989) saw quality as a unidimensional evaluation, a perspective endorsed by Zeithaml (1988). However from this study it seems clear that drinkers perceive wine quality to be a multi-dimensional concept. All except one of the informants provided a number of different dimensions to quality and for most informants the interrelation was complex, with extrinsic and intrinsic, catalytic and terminal dimensions all utilised. However, different dimensions seem to operate in different ways, with the critical distinction being between the catalytic and the terminal dimensions. Wine quality, it can be argued, is a relationship between pleasure/enjoyment and these catalysing dimensions such as gustation or potential.

Additionally, these quality dimensions often appear to have a relationship with both the motivation for drinking and the processes utilised for evaluating wine. The quality sub-dimension of taste is a good example of how this operates. 'Good taste' was offered by many informants as an experiential motivating factor for wine consumption; for some it was the paramount reason to drink. Taste also linked to food as a motivating issue, notably in the area of flavour complementarity. At the same time taste as a concept had a relationship to the impact of the situation of consumption on the process of evaluating quality. Food, it was suggested, could modify one's perceptions of a wine, and may have an impact on the effectiveness or nature of the assessment of wine quality. Thus taste as a sub-dimension of quality was linked to a key element of the motivation to consume wine and also an aspect of its evaluation. Similar relationships existed linking quality to motivational factors

and (sometimes) to evaluation for the dimensions of pleasure, complexity, interest and for the paradigmatic dimensions.

#### **4.1 Catalytic dimensions of wine quality**

As noted, most quality dimensions appear to be catalytic (or instrumental), whilst crucially pleasure seems to operate as a form of terminal quality. Some quality dimensions are closely linked to, or identical with, cues – appearance being the most obvious. Other dimensions, such as flavour and complexity, seem to be closely linked to, or abstracted from, product attributes. Others are less physical and more conceptual, such as the paradigmatic dimensions and interest.

The catalytic dimensions of wine quality are those aspects of the wine quality engagement process which relate most directly to the literature of wine tasting and appreciation. This is most apparent for the gustatory dimension, where terms like length, intensity, complexity and balance regularly recur in popular and professional wine guides (e.g., Basset, 2000; Jackson, 1997; Jackson, 2002; Schuster, 1992). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the terms used in such literature tend to be the more cognitive and less sensory of the gustatory sub-dimensions. This supports the point already made that the public discussion about wine is carried out by the highly involved and in language which only the highly involved use (Lockshin, 2002a). As some of the low-involvement informants in this study have suggested, explicitly or implicitly, they are alienated by jargon which seems, to them, to have no relationship to the wine they are drinking.

Other, non-gustatory, catalytic dimensions also reflect aspects of quality raised in the wine-related literature. Thus production methods, including faultlessness (Schuster, 1992), fitness for purpose (Schuster, 1992) and use of appropriate technical processes (Wright, 2001) were noted by some informants – even though their precise impact may not be fully understood. Additionally the paradigmatic dimensions reflected some elements of quality in the wine literature. Conformance to a regionally-defined specification, reflection of origin (terroir) and of variety have been noted by some as important to a wine's quality (Atkinson, 1999; Jackson, 1994; Merritt, 1997; Norman, 1996). Further, potential is considered by some to be an element of quality in wine (Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979). The two

latter dimensions - the paradigmatic and potential - are again cognitive, rather than sensory. This reinforces the link between high-involvement and the public discussion about the nature of wine quality in the wine literature.

The extrinsic, catalytic dimensions of quality, especially production methods, were considered important by a range of informants of all levels of involvement. The intrinsic, catalytic dimensions, however, appeared to operate as a kind of hierarchy. Different types of drinkers focused on different dimensions and sub-dimensions. Some intrinsic catalytic dimensions were most important to low-involvement informants (for example appearance and some of the gustatory sub-dimensions such as taste and smoothness). Other sub-dimensions, especially balance and concentration, were important for drinkers at all involvement levels. Yet others, the gustatory sub-dimensions of complexity and interest and the paradigmatic and potential dimensions, were only raised by medium and – especially – high-involvement drinkers.

## **4.2 The nature of pleasure**

Many, though not all, informants mentioned pleasure or enjoyment as a dimension of wine quality. Even when not explicitly mentioned, pleasure often seemed implicit in informants' words or in their response to the wines tasted if they were focus group participants. Pleasure also featured as one of the key motivations to drink even for some of those who did not rate it as a quality dimension. Pleasure was the dimension mentioned most consistently by informants from all reference groups and from the lowest to the highest level of involvement. It therefore seems that, in some form or another, pleasure is a fundamental aspect of the engagement with wine quality. However, whereas the wine-related literature regularly refers to the catalytic dimensions of the engagement with wine quality, it much less regularly considers pleasure integral to the process. Only two works, those by Amerine and Roessler (1976) and Peynaud (1987), refer explicitly to pleasure as a fundamental aspect of wine quality.

Having said that one caveat to the general proposition about the importance of pleasure should be noted. Some higher involvement drinkers, especially professionals, noted in their distinction of quality evaluation and preference that they

could assess the quality of a wine without necessarily enjoying it and still judge it highly. This could suggest two propositions: (1) That pleasure is integral to the engagement with quality and (2) that ideally - but not necessarily - it should be the pleasure of the individual engaging with the product.

It has been suggested by the results that quality is perceived to operate on a continuum, in the same way that the aesthetic experience operates on a continuum (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985). This continuum may not merely apply to the terminal dimension of quality, for it could be argued that a wine has more or less balance, or intensity, or potential, or interest. Nevertheless, it may be that it is in the pleasure experienced that this continuum is most obvious. Holbrook and Zirlin explicitly describe the continuum as being ‘between simple aesthetic pleasure and profound’ (1985 p. 3). At the more profound end of the continuum it seems that the pleasure shown in wine shares some aspects of the ‘flow’ experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), or the intense aesthetic experience expounded by some philosophical aestheticians (Beardsley, 1980; Dickie, 1971; Sibley, 2001). At this level attention becomes focused on wine, there is a sense of intellectual challenge and emotional detachment, and personal development occurs. Such a profound response to wine seems to have been experienced occasionally by a number of informants. It seems from the comments made that some, perhaps occasionally all, of the elements of the flow experience (especially focus and challenge) occur regularly. It may be with wine that whilst the profound aesthetic experience is an occasional occurrence, a ‘moderately profound’ response, involving some but not all of the aspects of the flow experience, may be a frequent event.

## **5 Conceptualising wine quality**

The investigation of how wine quality is conceptualised has been a major theme of this study. The subjective versus objective paradigm has informed many of the research findings. In developing the exploration of the conceptualisation of wine quality two models will be offered: one based on the simple subjective/objective dichotomy, and one developing the more complex typology of quality outlined in the literature review (chapter 3, section 1.2).

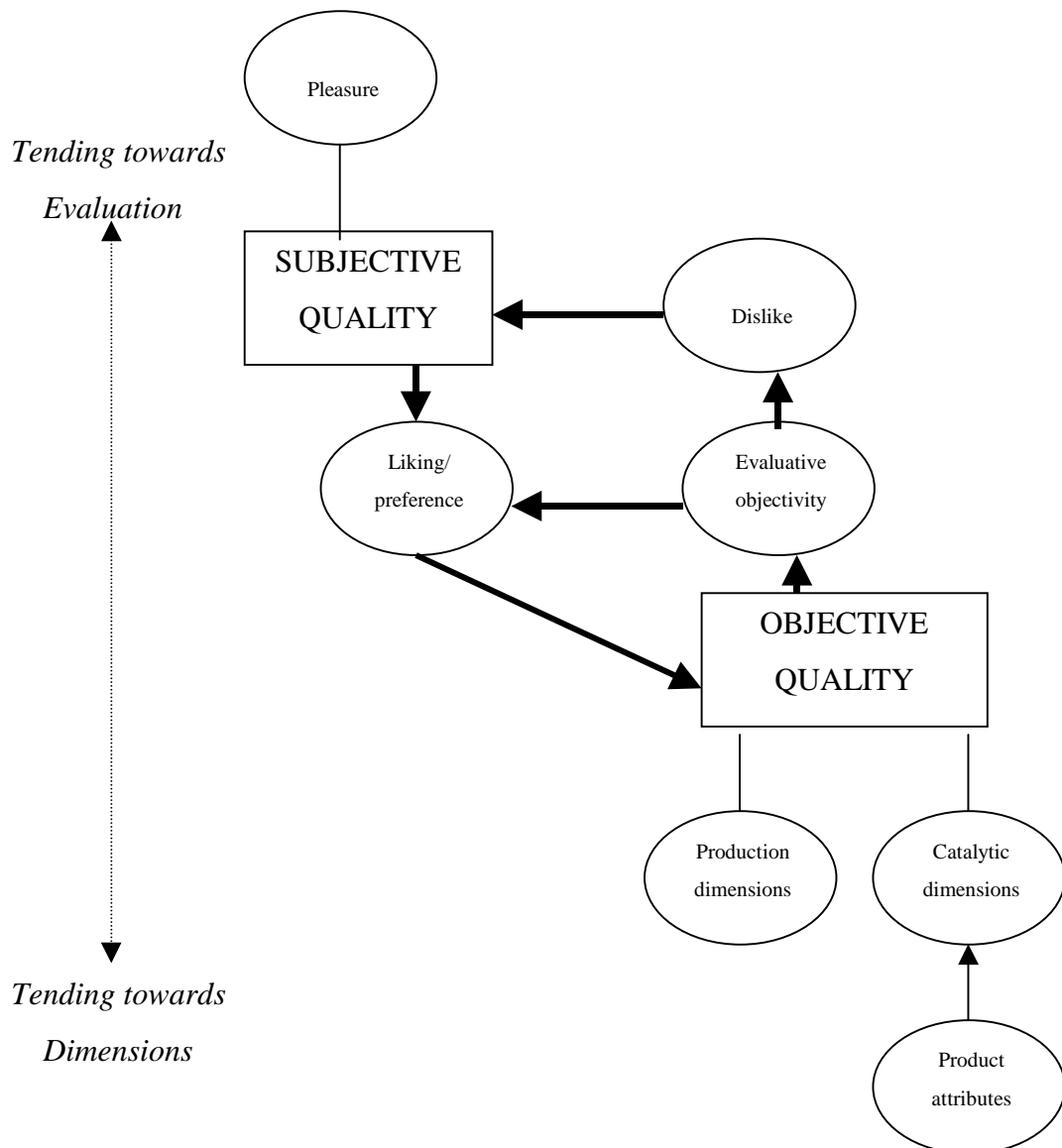
## **5.1 Managing the subjective/objective paradox**

As noted in the review of the literature, most research has focused on perceived quality and thus by definition on subjective quality, for it is the perceived aims, values and situation of the consumer which determines quality (Steenkamp, 1990). There were a number of drinkers who maintained this resolutely subjectivist perspective. They tended to be of lower involvement levels, although this group included a few high-involvement consumers and professionals. A marginally fewer number of drinkers seemed to hold a strictly objectivist perspective – that quality inheres in the wine itself. This group included a number of high-involvement consumers and – especially – professionals. Their perspective was that at least some dimensions of quality, such as balance, intensity or complexity, were externally verifiable and commonly perceptible – irrespective of who was tasting the wine.

It has been suggested occasionally in the literature that the quality perception process is more complex than a mere either/or dichotomy and involves both objective and subjective elements (Garvin, 1984). More specifically it has been proposed that quality involves an engagement between a subjective consumer and an external context, as suggested by Steenkamp (1990):

Perceived quality judgments emerge in a contextual setting and therefore cannot be located ‘inside’ the consumer as a completely subjective concept or ‘outside’ the consumer as a subject free objectivity (p. 314).

Another way to view it, therefore, would be to see quality engagement as a tension between a subjective element and an objective element. This can be visualised in graphic form (figure 9.2). This perspective was developed by many informants, including some of those who initially argued for a subjectivist position.



**Figure 9.2 – Subjective and objective quality**

In this model the catalytic quality dimensions of wine have a close relationship with product attributes. In some cases (e.g., appearance) they may seem identical to the product attributes and in others (e.g., complexity) they may be abstracted from them. Nevertheless the instrumental dimensions are objective; they exist in defined form in the product. The same can be said for the quality dimensions related to production.

Subjective quality is the core of the individual's relationship with the product, and relates closely to the quality dimension of pleasure. It is rooted in the individual's inability to have absolute certainty in the external validity of their

evaluation of the product. There are two ways in which the consumer can reconcile this paradox of the subjective and the objective. One, generally for low-involvement consumers, is to accept the existence of objective quality, but claim no ability to discern it, merely to 'know what I like'. These drinkers start from a subjectivist position but accept that objective quality exists paradoxically alongside that viewpoint. Objective quality as a means of determining preference has no relevance for them, for they cannot engage with it – they do not understand how to analyse wine's objective elements. To that extent they are divorced from objective quality. It can be suggested that the subjective element of the process tends to focus on the activity of evaluation, and the objective part tends to focus on the defined dimensions of quality. Preference relates closely to the correlate of personal taste, so that excessive oak or the use of a specific grape variety, for example, becomes important at this juncture.

The second way of reconciling this paradox was adopted by a few high-involvement consumers and many of the professionals. They approach wine systematically, with a checklist of points to be considered and/or a benchmark of what the wine should be like against which it can be evaluated. These approaches are consistent with many professional studies of wine tasting (Amerine & Roessler, 1976; Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Peynaud, 1987; Rankine, 1990). Such processes give these drinkers an 'objective' way into engagement with the product. While checklists and benchmarks offer a framework for evaluating the quality of the wine, they do not necessarily guarantee enjoyment. Thus an individual who drinks wine with this perspective starts from an objective standpoint, evaluates the wine using objective standards (marked as 'evaluative objectivity' in figure 9.2), but may reach the subjective position when they gain little pleasure, despite the wine apparently displaying the indicators of quality.

In some ways these two processes (preference and evaluative objectivity) can be seen to be a way by which wine consumers try to resolve the antinomy of taste – the paradox of personally-rooted evaluation with apparently universal judgments of products (Osborne, 1979b; Schaper, 1983). If it is accepted that individuals have a personal perspective on an aesthetic product, constrained amongst other things by personal taste, it is impossible to offer a truly objective aesthetic analysis of a product. Yet, accepting that there may be some external criteria by which the



product is judged, and applying those criteria (albeit subjectively and thus imperfectly), one may be able to contribute towards a ‘universal’ judgment of an artwork. Alternatively consumers with limited experience may lack the framework to engage with objective quality. They accept the universal judgment about a wine, that it is objectively good or bad, but rely on their own preference for a decision on whether or not they want to drink it, irrespective of that universal judgment.

## **5.2 The typology of wine quality**

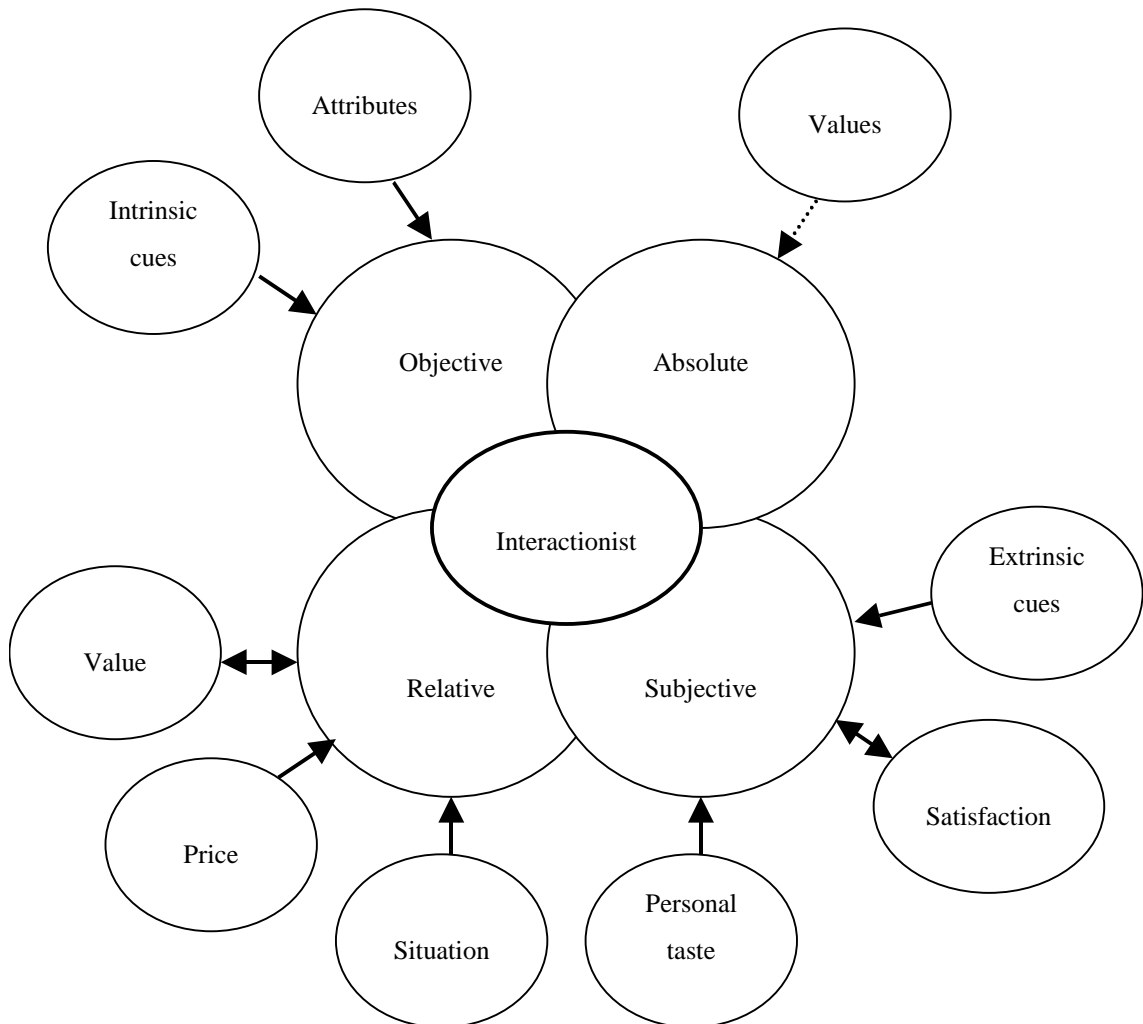
The second model for exploring wine quality can be offered by developing the typology outlined early in the literature review (figure 3.1) involving not merely objective and subjective quality, but also absolute and – crucially – relative quality. This proposed model is outlined at figure 9.3.

In this model the essence of quality can be understood via an interactionist perspective, reconciling not just the compatible approaches to quality (such as a joint absolute/objective perspective) but also the paradoxical approaches of absolute/relative and objective/subjective. At the same time each of the four types of quality mediates one or more correlates of quality in the quality formation process. Thus objective quality mediates product attributes and intrinsic cues, for these are the defined, quantifiable correlates of wine. Likewise subjective quality mediates satisfaction, personal taste and intrinsic cues (other than price) into the quality formation process, for these correlates relate closely to the individual’s personal response to the product. Relative quality is crucial in this model, for it is the point at which quality meets value, price and the situation of consumption. These three correlates are all perceived to be core precursors to quality within the marketing literature on the subject, and all allow for the existence of various ‘levels’ of quality, dependent on price, or the setting of consumption. Absolute quality, it could be posited, mediates the impact of values on the overall quality experience, for values are perhaps the correlate which most closely equate to the individual’s metaphysical outlook<sup>3</sup>. In the case of satisfaction and value (at least) the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> This is a cautious suggestion. Of all the quality correlates values was explored least in this study. This was a time-related issue because of the vastness of the subject and the fact that it seemed the most tangential of the correlates. Thus no formal laddering technique was used to relate motivation

quality and each of the correlates is a two-way process, with both of the correlates developing and being enhanced as a result of the relationship (Holbrook, 1994; Oliver, 1997; Sweeney & Soutar, 1995).



**Figure 9.3 – Quality and its correlates**

Such a model develops ideas hinted at by some researchers for quality (Steenkamp, 1990), or, in one instance, for value (Holbrook, 1994). However, as already suggested, the focus on perceived quality has concentrated attention on the subjective component of the typology. Paradoxes and their possible resolution are

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and quality perceptions to individuals' values. Nevertheless it seemed that personal values were implicit in certain aspects of the consumption experience. Note particularly chapter 6, section 1.4.

not especially popular for marketing pragmatists, but as a means of understanding how consumers may maintain a series of apparently contradictory ideas about the nature of quality this does offer a way forward. Importantly it also gives some suggestions about how the different quality correlates, often of a substantially varying conceptual nature, are integrated into the overall process.

Crucially, this possibility, in outline, if not in detail, was offered by a number of informants. For instance some made comments about being ‘as objective as possible in a subjective field’. Others suggested quantifying quality as, say, 70 per cent objective and 30 per cent that is personal. These ideas seem to show some wine drinkers explicitly expressing a paradoxical position which is only resolved by an interactionist approach.

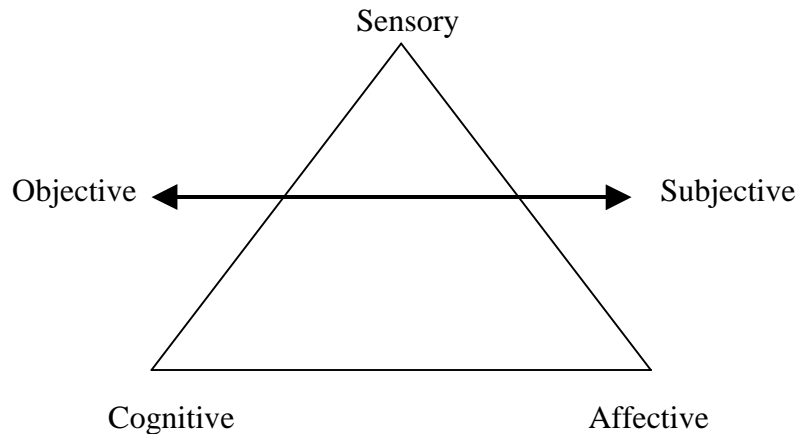
## **6 The psychophysical approach to drinking wine**

The literature on aesthetics – both philosophical and psychological - is uncertain whether or not an aesthetic experience is essentially a cognitive or affective event (Dickie, 1997; Funch, 1997), or even if it has a sensory dimension (Coleman, 1965). This split has been reflected in research into consumer aesthetics, with some apparently tending towards an essentially cognitive approach (for instance Wallendorf et al., 1980) and others appearing to focus on an affective stance (Holbrook, 1981).

It seems clear from this study that, for wine at least, all three approaches to wine quality have relevance. Informants talked about the taste of wine, an initially physiological response. Some extrapolated from that to refer to wine’s sensuous nature. They also discussed the importance of complexity and interest as dimensions of wine quality, thus referring to the cognitive approach. Additionally they regularly ‘liked’ or ‘disliked’ a wine which, especially in the context of the quality dimension of pleasure, denoted an affective response. This conclusion accords with Holbrook’s (1995) study of the impact of variable rhythm, tempo, dynamics and phrasing on perceptions of music, which concluded that each of these (auditory – thus sensory) variables influence perceptions (cognition) which in turn has an impact on affect. The current study would not necessarily invariably order the three in that way,

although it is a logical sequence and may be a common response to wine. However, the study does support the idea that all three operate in the evaluative process. Like the quality dimensions, this triadic approach to wine drinking was not just a feature of how drinkers assessed wine. It also featured in their motivation to drink, and in their understanding of wine quality dimensions. Thus enjoyment, as a factor motivating consumption, had elements that were affective (pleasurable), sensory (flavourful) and cognitive (challenge and knowledge). It seems that the three approaches are interrelated. The sensory element of complex taste stimulates the cognitive motivation of intellectual challenge which in turn inspires the affective enjoyment of the wine. This threefold approach also featured when discussion turned to explicitly aesthetic issues. A number of informants made the connection between the consumption of wine and of music because both stimulated (affective) pleasure. Some noted the similarity of (cognitive) evaluation processes. Some also talked about the sensuous nature of both. Such a perspective has recently received some support from research into the physiology of tasting. This research, analysing brain activity during tasting, noted differences between the more cognitive approach adopted by sommeliers compared with the less cognitive responses made by 'casual drinkers' (Styles, 2003). Expert drinkers revealed neural activity in the frontal cortices – those parts of the brain utilised for cognitive processes.

Thus the psychophysical approaches to wine consumption in triadic form can be shown graphically (figure 9.4).



**Figure 9.4 – The cognitive, sensory, affective approach to drinking**

As set out here, the three approaches can be used individually or, more commonly, in some combination when drinking wine. The suggestion is also made that the triad operates on an objective/subjective axis. Cognition tends to deal with more objective responses to wine, affect focuses on the subjective dimension of pleasure, whereas sensation has elements of both, including both mental analysis of the physiological response and an emotional attraction/repulsion.

It is important to note that all elements of this triadic approach to consumption and to quality evaluation may be utilised by any drinker but that some drinkers may focus more on one approach than the other. Thus it has been suggested in the findings that MEs, especially males, tended to be especially cognitive both in analysing their motivation to drink and in their approach to the evaluation of quality. It also concurs with research done by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) which examined the views of art gallery and museum curators on aesthetics. They noted four ‘dimensions’ of the aesthetic experience, the first three of which comprised:

A perceptual response, which concentrated on elements such as balance, form and harmony; an emotional response, which emphasized reactions to the emotional content of the work and personal associations; an intellectual response, which focused on theoretical and art-history questions (1990 p. 28).

These three aspects of the experience are similar to the sensory (immediate perceptual), affective and cognitive approaches to wine. Csikszentmihalyi and

Robinson then commented that some of their informants would only talk in cognitive terms, yet others thought that cognition was secondary to the sensory or affective aspects of the experience. However:

Even those who gave a prominent place to the intellectual experience often stressed the fact that cognitive processes tended to come into play for them only after the work had made its impact on a perceptual or emotional ... level (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990 p. 41).

Thus although the importance of the three approaches appears less readily acknowledged within philosophical aesthetics, this study supports the conclusions of some others who have investigated the aesthetic experience and concluded that sensation, cognition and emotion all play a role.

It is necessary to stress that this proposition is a simple, apparently precise analysis of what is in practice a complex, interactive process. A sensory response may be instantaneous before the drinker begins to feel pleasure in the wine or think about its complexity, or balance, or concentration. Likewise with some (generally higher-involvement) drinkers observed in the focus groups, a cognitive analysis appeared to occur before any sense of pleasure developed and the cognitive reaction often seemed to reinforce and develop the momentary sensation and the pleasure. It is not possible to categorise informants as being only cognitive, or sensory, or affective. Each approach may have had different weighting for varying informants, however, and all will have interacted in a very intricate manner.

## **7 The quality perception process for wine**

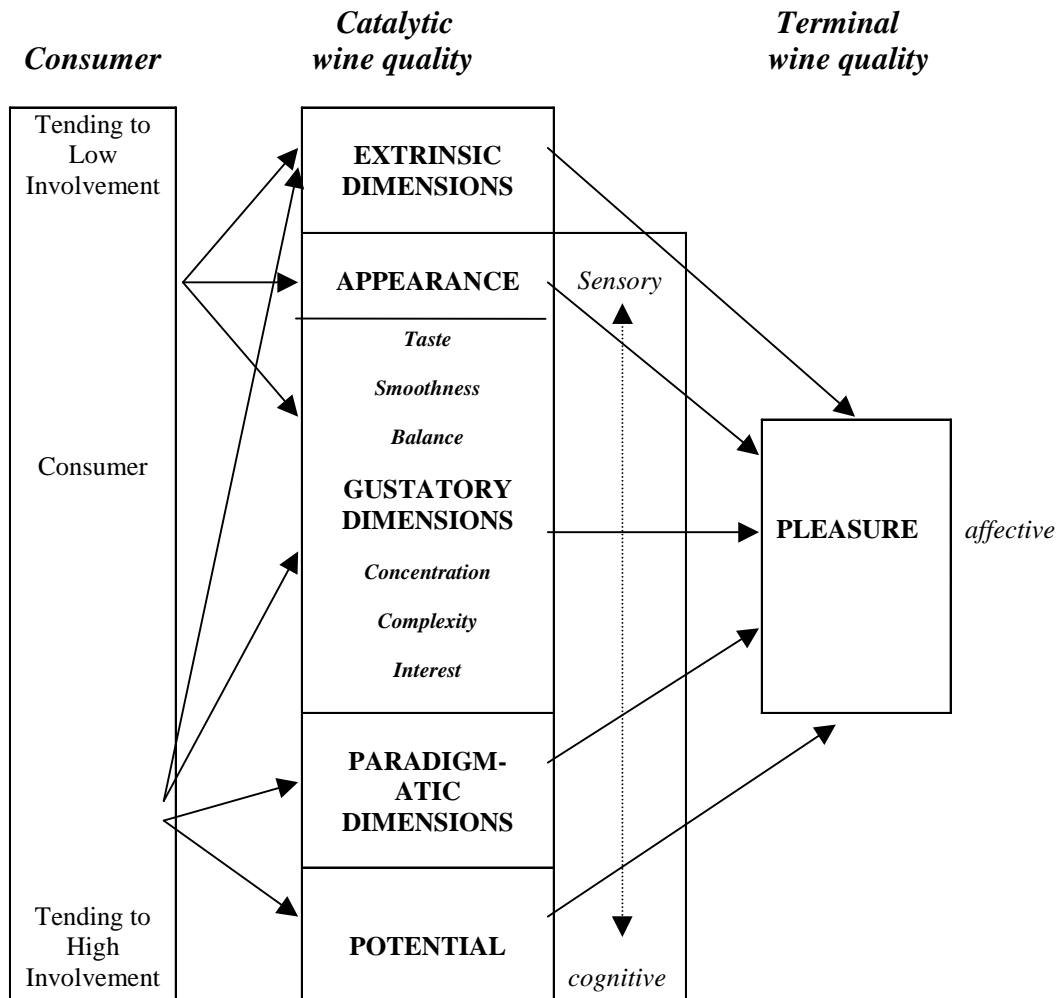
A number of ideas have been suggested from the findings surrounding drinkers' perceptions of wine quality. These include approaches to quality, its conceptualisation and dimensions, and the importance of involvement in each of these elements of the concept. Is it possible to integrate all of these into a single quality perception process?

A series of factors would be relevant to any integrated approach. First is the consumer, who has an involvement level ranging between low and high. The consumer's initial engagement with wine deals with, at least in quality terms, the catalytic dimensions of wine quality. There is, as the discussion on involvement

above suggests, an implication that some catalytic dimensions of wine quality are utilised more by lower involvement drinkers and some by higher involvement drinkers.

The extrinsic dimensions of catalytic wine quality are important in the wine quality engagement process but of a somewhat different nature. They are adopted by drinkers at all levels of involvement, and they seem to be necessary but not sufficient to catalyse terminal quality. Ultimately a series of propositions can be suggested: (1) All the intrinsic, catalytic dimensions of wine quality are capable of leading to terminal quality (pleasure). In the event that the catalytic dimensions are insufficient, then there will be no terminal pleasure and thus an evaluation that quality is absent. (2) Not every catalytic dimension will be used by every drinker, nor will any individual necessarily use the same catalytic dimensions on every occasion, but they are all potentially available to each drinker. (3) The number of catalytic dimensions which register with the drinker will have an impact on the level of pleasure, and therefore on the level of quality. As an example, one could suggest that a wine that looks attractive, has fairly intense flavours which the drinker finds pleasant but is not entirely smooth (perhaps the tannins are a bit coarse) will be of moderate quality. A wine which has all of those components but fine tannins and very long length will be perceived to be of quite high quality.

This process is exemplified in figure 9.5. This figure starts at the left with the consumer, then moves on to the catalytic wine dimensions (showing for illustrative purposes some, but not all, of the gustatory sub-dimensions). The figure then ends at the right with the terminal dimension of quality – pleasure.



**Figure 9.5 - A model of the wine quality engagement process**

For ease of comprehension it has been assumed that the consumer is either high or low involvement but, if the argument in section 2 above is accepted, there is actually a full range of potential involvement levels. Each of these involvement levels could utilise an assortment of catalytic wine quality dimensions. Thus all consumers may make equal use of the extrinsic dimensions of wine quality (especially those relating to production). The lower involvement consumer is more likely to focus on appearance and, particularly, some of the gustatory dimensions such as taste, smoothness and balance. The higher involvement drinker may focus on some of the same gustatory sub-dimensions, such as balance – but also on others like complexity or interest.



Having noted that the extrinsic dimensions are slightly different in the quality engagement process (because they may be used by all types of consumer equally), it can be suggested that the triadic cognitive/sensory/affective analysis of the approach to wine consumption can be overlaid on this model. The intrinsic, catalytic quality dimensions at the top of the model tend to be more sensory in operation. Thus appearance as a dimension of quality is about the visual, almost visceral response to the depth and hue of the wine's colour. (This is in contradistinction to the operation of appearance as a cue, when it may be used very cognitively to indicate the age or condition of the wine, or the grape variety, or production methods used). Likewise the most widely used gustatory sub-dimensions (taste, smoothness) are very much about an instinctive sensory response to the wine. The least used sub-dimensions, complexity and interest, are highly cognitive. Those 'in the middle', balance and concentration, which are quite widely adopted, have elements that are both sensory and cognitive. The length of a wine's finish, for instance, is something one senses after the wine has been swallowed, but which also requires some cognitive recognition.

One can extend this further by suggesting that the affective point of the triadic analysis of approach (figure 9.4) tends to link closely with pleasure – a felt response to consumption. It is important to note, however, that this is a simplified explanation of what is in practice complex. As suggested above, the relationship between the three approaches is interactive, with each tending to reinforce the other in operation.

## **8 The quality perception process for aesthetic goods**

This study has offered some support for the idea that wine is an aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic product. It has been suggested that the consumption of wine is substantially aesthetic because it focuses on beauty and that it is capable of providing intrinsic aesthetic value. Crucially most of the drinkers interviewed in the study perceive similarities to other aesthetic products. These similarities centre on the importance of personal taste, the role of evaluation (including cognitive processes dealing with catalytic quality) and the pleasurable response (terminal quality) which they engender. Additionally for some informants both wine and music are 'created'

or ‘interpreted’, giving them the status of artwork. It is therefore interesting to consider whether or not this examination of wine quality can offer any ideas about the quality engagement process during aesthetic consumption generally.

### **8.1 The dimensions of aesthetic quality engagement**

The wine quality engagement process as outlined above is discrete to wine. Whilst terminal quality, pleasure, enjoyment and positive affective response, may be shared in the consumption of many things, including aesthetic and other experiential products, the catalytic dimensions are clearly discrete to wine<sup>4</sup>. Merely to say that what is common to the experience of quality in aesthetic products is pleasure is essentially platitudinous and hardly defines aesthetic products, for the same could be said of any positive experiential consumption experience. What is of interest, however, is whether or not there is anything common which can be abstracted from those catalytic dimensions which marks out the diverse range of products that focus on conveying ‘beauty’.

One way may be to build on the framework of Beardsley’s (1980) concept of the ‘general canons’ of aesthetic evaluation<sup>5</sup>. Beardsley argued that the general canons are rules which apply to all works of art. He distinguished them from other, product-specific evaluative criteria (sometimes termed ‘regional’ (Sibley, 2001)). Thus a piece of music needs to show appropriate tempo, melody and harmony – terms which cannot be applied to a painting, poem or wine. However, the interpretation of these product-specific criteria involves assessing their integration or balance, their intensity and their complexity – criteria that might be applicable to all aesthetic products.

Adopting this approach would see the catalytic dimensions of wine quality ‘interpreted’ aesthetically. As noted in chapter 3, Beardsley’s (1980) general canons

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<sup>4</sup> Many or all of the catalytic dimensions may be common to other products, such as beer or a meal. However, it is argued that the particular configuration outlined in this study only operates for wine.

<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out that Beardsley explicitly excluded wine and fine food from being capable of aesthetic evaluation. His conclusion has been contested by other philosophers (Coleman, 1965; Korsmeyer, 1999; Osborne, 1977; Railton, 1998). Beardsley’s perspective does not, in itself, negate the argument developed in this section.

comprised intensity, unity (also interpreted as balance – the harmony of the component parts) and complexity. It was suggested in chapter 3 that these general canons were also mirrored in the literature on psychological aesthetics (Arnheim, 1974; Berlyne, 1974; McBride, 1990) and on aesthetic consumption (Holbrook, 1980).

It can be noted at this point that each of the general canons have already been identified by informants as product-specific catalytic wine quality dimensions. Thus balance, intensity and complexity are included alongside the regional evaluative criteria of appearance, taste and ageing potential. This, however, does not preclude their operation as quality indicators both for wine and more generally for other aesthetic products.

### ***8.1.1 Distinctiveness and interest***

Before integrating Beardsley's general canons into the wine quality engagement process it is worth considering whether or not the general canons are sufficient for this process. If any others are admitted then they must be both applicable to the aesthetic consumption of any product and they must also be necessary to the delineation of the aesthetic quality of that product.

One might - from the work of psychologists on the subject – be tempted to add another general canon to the three offered by Beardsley; that of distinctiveness, which includes the related aspects of character (McBride, 1990), novelty (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) and the surprising (Child, 1969)<sup>6</sup>. Alternatively, as suggested in this study, as a gustatory sub-dimension of quality interest can be seen as having a close connection to distinctiveness. One can note here the suggestion of Holbrook (1995) that 'profound aesthetic experience', especially, may result in part from a dialectical process of 'structure-departure-

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<sup>6</sup> Beardsley himself would have not accepted this, arguing firmly that there are only three general canons (Beardsley, 1980). Other philosophers of aesthetics have subsequently disputed this and argued that others may exist (Dickie, 1997; Sibley, 2001). Philosophers have not acknowledged distinctiveness as an evaluative dimension of aesthetic quality, although some have referred to novelty. (e.g., Cothey, 1990). Originality has often been considered a key element of an artwork – but even that claim is disputed (Osborne, 1979a). It has been suggested that Kant acknowledged uniqueness as a 'formal element in aesthetic interest' (Scruton, 1974 p. 23).

reconciliation', which results in a deep emotional response (1995 p. 37). This could, in some circumstances, be interpreted as the factor which makes a product different. Wallendorf et al. (1980) referred to this factor as surprise, and considered it part of a successful aesthetic encounter.

Evidence for the existence of this concept of distinctiveness or interest, at least in regard to wine, comes from the comments of informants on the topic. Some informants spontaneously suggested that distinctiveness or interest had a relevance to wine quality and others, when asked, subsequently concurred with that suggestion. Even when distinctiveness was not considered essential to wine quality, informants would suggest memorableness or some similar term to mark out the uniqueness and interest provided by a wine. There is also some evidence from wine literature that distinctiveness is perceived by both critics and producers to be an element of quality (Basset, 2000; Grahm, 2003). Likewise the noted US wine critic, Robert Parker, has suggested that interest and personality may be essential to the very best wines (Parker, 1997), and the oenologist Jackson posits that interest and memorableness are also important (Jackson, 2002).

One can see how this may operate in music. The pianist Glenn Gould recorded two piano interpretations of Bach's Goldberg Variations; one in 1955 and the second in 1981. Both may have the other dimensions of quality (intensity, complexity and unity/balance) but what makes them especially sought after is their distinctiveness. The earlier version, recorded when he was young, took under 39 minutes to play. The second version, made just before his death, was perceived to be the work of a mature man and was played in just over 51 minutes (Cline, 2002). Both may be argued to have elements of quality, but their distinctiveness, both in timing and the respective maturity of interpretation could be argued to add an extra dimension to that quality.

### ***8.1.2 Technical acceptability***

A further addition to Beardsley's three general canons of unity, complexity and intensity may also be needed. This suggestion is based less on the literature on the subject of aesthetic value and more on the data offered by this research. It seems apparent that, from the evidence of informants, appropriate production methods are

integral to the quality of a wine, at least as a prerequisite for the other quality dimensions to operate. By extension it can be suggested that some form of technical competence is integral to aesthetic quality.

One can explore this further with wine. All the balance, intensity or complexity available will not guarantee quality if a wine is riddled with volatile acidity or cork taint. The comments made by informants that a wine should be fault-free, fit for its purpose, or produced according to specification all seem to act as a precursor to the successful operation of other wine quality dimensions. At the same time it should be noted that it is not necessarily technical perfection which was required. The point was made by some informants that ‘recipe’ wines could be bland and boring and that an occasional, minor, technical lapse could actually add interest to the wine. Thus it could be posited that whilst technical perfection is not essential as a dimension of wine quality, technical acceptability is; the wine must attain a basic minimum standard of fruit flavour, without any dominant faults which mar it<sup>7</sup>.

This idea of technical acceptability could possibly be extended to all forms of aesthetic consumption. It can be suggested that any work of art requires a basic level of technical acceptability. A painter must show essential control of line and colour, a pianist of timbre and tempo. Minor lapses (a fluctuation in timing) or variations from a norm (a cadenza) may add interest, and can be tolerated but – depending on the musical form - interpolated discords may not be. In the example given above of the pianist Glenn Gould it has been noted that he modified the composer’s original score by adding in repeat verses – a technique that Bach ‘did not approve of’ (Cline, 2002 paragraph 3). Nevertheless this technical variation, even lapse - has been perceived to add to the quality of the interpretation.

Technical acceptability, however, is slightly different from the other general canons. They are things with which consumers positively engage – which arouse excitement and interest. Technical acceptability is unlikely to inspire such a response. It seems to be more a prerequisite for the other general canons or perhaps

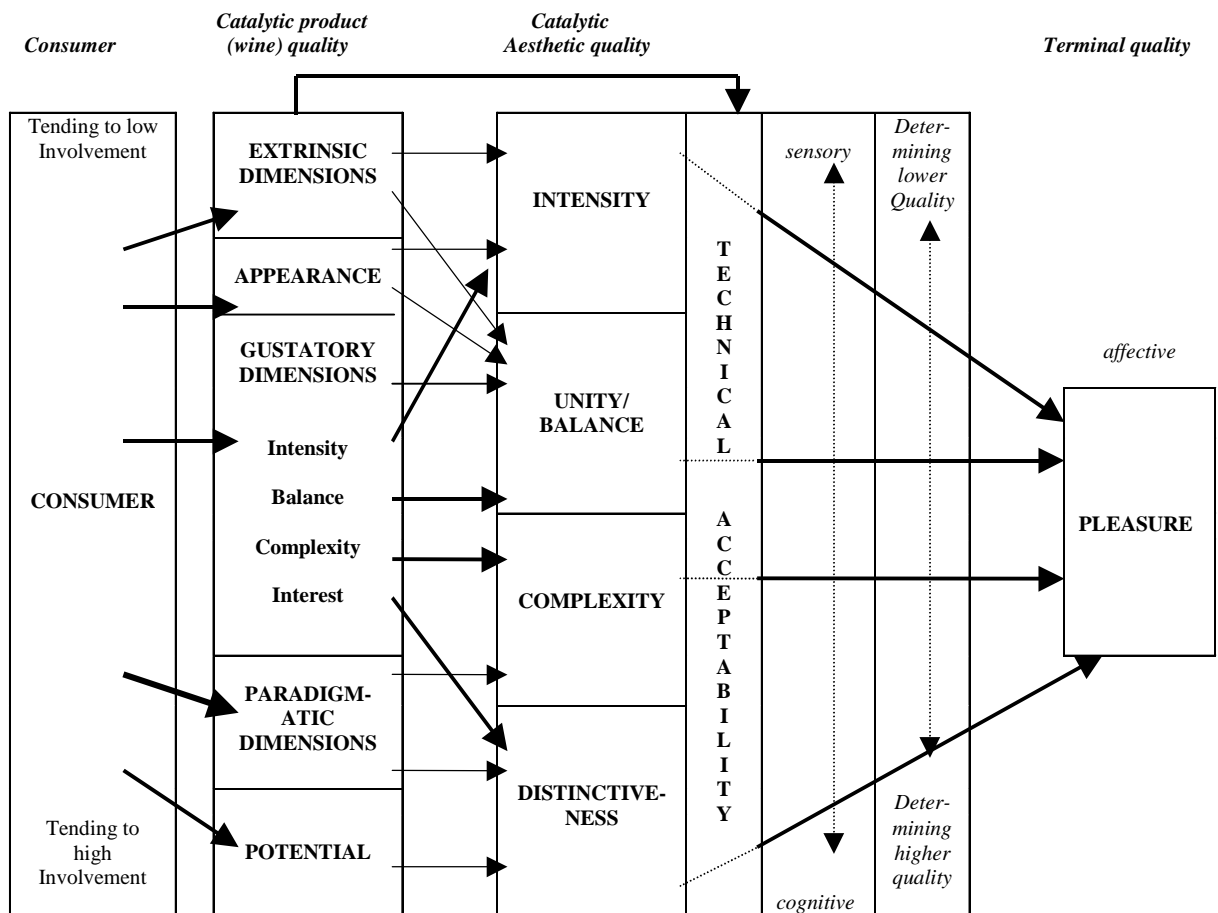
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<sup>7</sup> Pre-modern aesthetic theorists, such as Plato and Aquinas, would not have accepted this, claiming that perfection was essential to the aesthetic object (Dickie, 1971; Plato, n.d./1951). Modern theorists have paid less attention to the criteria of good aesthetic technique.

to underpin them. There cannot be unified complexity if there is also discord, nor balance if an instrument is played too loudly.

## 8.2 A model of aesthetic quality engagement

If it is accepted that distinctiveness and technical acceptability both operate as general canons then the model of the wine quality engagement process (figure 9.5) can be developed further, to give it wider applicability to aesthetic and quasi-aesthetic goods in general. This is shown in figure 9.6.



**Figure 9.6 - A model of the aesthetic quality engagement process**

The role of the consumer, and of the catalytic wine quality dimensions, is similar to figure 9.5. However, a new group of dimensions has been added. These

relate to Beardsley's (1980) general canons, but may perhaps more aptly be considered as 'catalytic dimensions of aesthetic quality'. Technical acceptability is included, but in a slightly different way, as it is used to underpin the other four aesthetic catalytic dimensions rather than functioning alongside them. The process appears complex, but in operation is fairly straightforward, as will be explained below.

### ***8.2.1 Linking product specific and aesthetic quality dimensions***

The product-specific catalytic dimensions of wine quality interact in different ways with the general aesthetic dimensions. Extrinsic wine quality dimensions, especially grape quality and production processes, may have an impact on the intensity and balance of the wine (and possibly its complexity as well) but critically they function as precursors to the technical acceptability of the product. Appearance informs the aesthetic dimension of intensity, as do some of the other gustatory sub-dimensions. However, most important as a precursor for intensity (as a catalytic aesthetic dimension) is the gustatory sub-dimension of wine intensity which is very similar to it. Likewise the key determinant of the aesthetic dimension of unity is the wine quality sub-dimension of balance, although other gustatory dimensions, and appearance, may also be precursors to this. The paradigmatic dimension of wine quality and, crucially, the complexity sub-dimension lead to complexity as a general catalytic aesthetic quality dimension. The paradigmatic and potential wine quality dimensions also feed into the aesthetic dimension of distinctiveness, but the dominant factor here is the relationship of the wine quality sub-dimension of interest to the aesthetic dimension.

The cognitive/sensory/affective triad remains superimposed on the model but now on the aesthetic quality dimensions<sup>8</sup>. Intensity is the most sensory of these dimensions, and distinctiveness the most cognitive. Pleasure – the terminal quality dimension – tends towards the affective.

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<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the cognitive/sensory/affective triadic approach is relevant to other aesthetic products. With some, like music and poetry, there may be a substantial sensory element in the engagement with the product. This is less true for painting, and even less relevant for, say, a novel. Arguably with the latter the more cognitive catalytic dimensions assume greater relevance.

### ***8.2.2 The operation of the catalytic dimensions of aesthetic quality***

One other component has been added to this model. It is suggested that the top catalytic aesthetic quality dimensions (intensity and unity/balance) are the core dimensions in two ways. First, they are the easiest for low-involvement consumers to engage with. The intensity and unity ('smoothness', balance) of a wine are more sensory, and more instantly perceived. They require less cognitive processing and thus less background knowledge and experience. Complexity and, particularly, distinctiveness need a broad experience with the product type and a series of comparative frameworks. Such knowledge is not normally available to the average consumer of sculpture, music or wine. This is supported by some previous studies on the impact of complexity in aesthetic consumption (Wallendorf et al., 1980).

Related to this is another hypothesis that the more cognitive aesthetic dimensions are used to make judgments about products at higher perceived quality levels. Thus a moderately good painting or poem should show elements of balance and intensity (plus any product-specific catalytic dimensions which may be relevant). However, what marks out the higher quality works is first complexity, and then, for the very highest, distinctiveness. Indeed, one could argue that an aesthetic product may be of high quality without necessarily being distinctive, but that to be of the very highest quality it must show dimensions which tend to make it unique. In the case of wine, those may include the reflection of a specific vineyard site or use of an almost unknown grape variety. However, the cognitive element engaged at this point may make distinctiveness less attractive as a criterion for lower-involvement consumers to use. This may explain why some studies have suggested that novelty is – in part at least - unwelcome as an element in aesthetic consumption (Holbrook, 1995). In practice it is likely to be lower involvement consumers who will find novelty difficult to appreciate or accept.

Note that this model offers a means of engaging with quality that is appropriate to all consumers. It does not require a distinction between novices and experts, or professionals and amateurs. Rather it suggests that consumers with different backgrounds may place varying emphases on the relevant dimensions. Nevertheless, it also presupposes that the most knowledgeable consumer, able to assess the distinctiveness of a product instantly, also needs to engage with, and be



satisfied by, each of the other more sensory dimensions of aesthetic quality in order to attain terminal quality. This could offer a partial explanation of the reason why experts and amateurs may – occasionally at least - share similar responses to aesthetic goods (Solomon et al., 1984). This consensus of response has also been cautiously noted in Holbrook's examination of popular and expert responses to movies (Holbrook, 1999b). In that study the existence of 'shared tastes' was suggested by the data despite the fact that, at least with films, 'ordinary consumers and professional critics rely on at least some differing as opposed to shared standards of evaluation' (1999b p. 153). This proposition from the findings is an especially tentative area of a generally tentative discussion. However it may be useful as one possible model for seeing a common evaluative mechanism transferable across a range of aesthetic products.

## **CHAPTER 9:**

### **WINE QUALITY: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

A number of key themes have permeated this study, recurring in the literature and throughout the presentation and interpretation of the data. These have included pleasure; personal taste and objectivity; experiential processes such as feeling and sensation; and thought. These key issues, and their interaction, will be evaluated within a theoretical context.

However, underpinning all else and thus dealt with first are two topics which permeated the findings. The first is the difficulty that consumers have when engaging with wine quality as an issue. This has been examined from the theorist's standpoint in the past, but not so much from the consumer's perspective. Additionally there is the whole question of involvement as it relates to quality. This study does not add substantially to the general literature on the topic of involvement but does apply our existing understanding to the issue of how people approach wine quality.

The focus of this study has been quality itself. What follows is an attempt to synthesise the findings of this study with the literature on the subject and to draw out some theoretical perspectives on wine and aesthetic quality. Thus the dimensions of wine quality are considered, categorised and compared with the current theoretical understanding of quality. The process of conceptualising wine quality is also explored, as is the way in which drinkers categorise wine quality. This exploration is undertaken in the light of the academic marketing focus on perceived quality and the aesthetic theory of the antinomy of taste. Although this is not a psychological study the psychophysical approaches that consumers take to wine drinking seem to have relevance for how its quality is perceived. Therefore this issue, not previously considered in the literature, is addressed. Finally a new model for the quality perception process in wine is suggested, and consideration is then given to the possibility of modifying that model and applying it to aesthetic products generally.

# 1 The difficulty of engaging with wine quality

It was noted in the literature review on the subject of quality that researchers find it a difficult concept to define and to engage with. This difficulty is in part a result of the multiple definitions of the concept and in part to do with its abstract nature. Consequently, it was noted, researchers themselves use varying ways of categorising and analysing quality, including a tendency to resort to perceived quality as a definition. This has two results. First it places onto the consumer the onus of determining what quality is. Second it makes the job of the marketing researcher simpler because they are absolved from the responsibility of defining quality. It becomes a process limited to recording, analysing and quantifying the consumer's perceptions of the quality dimensions of a product. This may be comparatively simple with consumer durables (for instance electrical goods (Sweeney & Soutar, 1995)), and even possible with service quality, using systems such as SERVQUAL, (Palmer, 1998; Parasuraman et al., 1988). However, it becomes more difficult with aesthetic products where the old saw *de gustibus non est disputandum*<sup>1</sup> is regularly used to pre-empt effective comparison or evaluation.

It is clear from the findings of this study that the academic difficulty in grappling with the concept of taste is mirrored by wine consumers. Both chapter 7 (the nature of wine quality) and chapter 8 (the assessment of wine quality) commenced with sections which noted, in some detail, the problems faced by drinkers in trying to conceptualise, analyse and evaluate quality in wine. Those problems existed not merely for consumers, but also for professionals and especially, it seemed, for some MEs who found difficulty in divorcing their ideas about quality from the consumer's perspective.

The difficulties faced by consumers appear to stem from a number of sources. In part, they share a common problem with academics in trying to define an abstract concept. This is compounded with a product like wine because of the fuzziness of its aesthetic nature (Amerine & Roessler, 1976) which is harder to engage with than, say, the speed and fuel consumption of a car. The suggestion has therefore been

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<sup>1</sup> 'There can be no debate about matters of taste'.

made that, for wine, quality 'is much easier to recognize than define' (Amerine & Roessler, 1976 p. 2).

This study found that this conceptual difficulty is further compounded because of the problem drinkers face with the language of tasting. To a certain extent this stems from the well-established fact that people categorise tastes by aroma and flavour, rather than by words (Engen, 1987; Lawless, 1985). At the same time, based on this study, many drinkers seem to object when a specific language of wine is developed. They may see it as jargon, designed to exclude the general public from understanding the product. Where language is used one word may have a variable meaning for different drinkers (as noted in the discussion on smoothness).

The difficulty of pinning down the nature of quality means that its correlates, and specifically its cues, may get confused with quality itself. This was observed in passing in the discussion on the relativist conceptualisation of wine but also specifically in the discussion on the dimensions of wine quality. Thus, for example, appearance seems to be used by some consumers as a quality dimension and a few also equate quality to value. It may be easier for consumers to pin quality onto the 'lower level', more concrete aspects of a wine than the higher-level more abstract dimensions.

None of this is altogether surprising. What is surprising however is that whilst researchers have spent some time noting the difficulty that they may have understanding quality, they have paid little attention to the difficulties that the consumer has with the idea. The fact that it is hard for consumers to get to grips with and explain quality, at least in relation to an aesthetic product like wine, makes any conclusions about the nature of wine quality doubly tentative.

## **2 Involvement**

A theme which has run through the findings of this study is the relevance of involvement to the understanding of wine quality. As noted in the literature review there have been some studies which have indirectly linked involvement to perceived quality. The linking factor may be price (Bloch, 1986; Lichtenstein et al., 1988), cues (Lee & Lou, 1995/96; Zaichkowsky, 1988) or attribute ranking (Quester &

Smart, 1998). However there has been little to connect involvement and quality directly and nothing which links involvement and the perceived quality of wine. The findings of this study tend to suggest that there are differences in the way that wine drinkers approach the product; for instance that high-involvement drinkers have a tendency to focus more on interest and complexity than the less involved. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the key distinction this study makes between drinkers is about involvement level, so that the most highly involved consumers seemed to have much more in common with professionals than they did with low-involvement consumers. This study indicates that it is more appropriate to differentiate between drinkers' involvement levels rather than distinguishing between professionals and consumers (although those differences did exist, as they also existed between mediators and producers). Thus, when it comes to the conceptualisation of wine quality, high- and medium-involvement consumers appear more likely to agree with professionals that quality is objective than are low-involvement consumers. However, it also seems that all levels of involvement are just as likely to take a subjectivist approach.

With the dimensions of wine quality, all involvement levels considered pleasure and enjoyment important, and all seemed to have equal regard for the importance of production processes (although the sub-dimension of consistency in wine appeared relevant to low-involvement drinkers only). On the other hand, the significance of grape quality as a dimension tended to be an issue for the more highly involved. Additionally, high-involvement drinkers seemed more likely to consider ageing potential and the paradigmatic dimensions as important. The latter particularly applied to the relevance of the vineyard of origin, which professionals especially considered important, although even medium-involvement drinkers might concur with this. Low- and medium-involvement drinkers seemed more likely to consider appearance a quality dimension.

The sub-dimensions of gustatory wine quality also offer some interesting contrasts. Length and body seemed equally important to all drinkers. Taste and smoothness were noted as concerns primarily by the medium- and low-involvement drinkers (though the caveats have been made that taste may be 'taken as read' by high-involvement drinkers, and smoothness may be similar to the sub-dimensions of balance, body or texture). Crucially, high-involvement drinkers were apparently

more likely to see complexity, interest and distinctiveness (and possibly balance) as being important, and low-involvement consumers seemed more likely explicitly to disagree that distinctiveness is a sub-dimension of wine quality.

It has been argued that involvement operates as either high/low and not on a continuum (Rossiter et al., 1991), although others disagree with this view (Brennan & Mavondo, 2000). The evidence of this study suggests that there is at least a medium level of involvement, and probably that a continuum does operate. Those who were classified as medium-involvement shared some high-involvement perspectives on wine quality, especially the more cognitive dimensions such as complexity and interest. At the same time they also adopted some of the more sensory dimensions which were important to low-involvement consumers, especially appearance and taste. Uniquely they gave the impression of placing more reliance on the influence of gatekeepers in the process of quality evaluation than the other two categories. Nevertheless, whilst interpreting the data from these informants there was a sense that they were people who tended to be in transit. They seemed to be those who were gaining more of an interest in wine (embarking on wine courses, for instance, or beginning to visit wineries), or they had come into contact with wine professionals who had engaged them more with the product. It may be that, as a group, they were in a trajectory which was tending to take them to a high-involvement level. Often it could be sensed that with more time, or more money, that is where they would end. To this extent the research showed some limited correspondence with the work of Quester and Smart (1998) linking high-involvement to age and income.

Involvement also appeared relevant to the way the aesthetic nature of wine was viewed. All informants seemed just as likely to see the consumption of wine and the consumption of music as similar, and all considered pleasure and evaluatory processes to be significant evidence of this link. However, high-involvement consumers seemed more likely to articulate some type of 'profound aesthetic experience' with wine. They also apparently placed more emphasis on the exploratory, challenging and cognitive elements of the aesthetic engagement. Moderately involved consumers concurred with the highly involved on that latter issue, but also shared the low-involvement focus on personal taste as a key factor uniting the experience of wine and music.

Differences between the categories also emerged from their processes of assessing wine quality. All seemed to place emphasis on cues and to consider situation important as an influence on evaluation. However, observation in focus groups suggested that the highly involved appeared more likely to use cognitive approaches to wine assessment. In other words they used terms such as ‘I think ...’ more often during the analysis of the wines tasted, and they used terms such as complexity or interest more often as dimensions of quality. This accords with previous research which suggests that low-involvement drinkers are likely to be less cognitive in their approach to the correlates of wine quality (Lockshin & Spawton, 2001). The more highly involved tended to consider appearance a cue to quality, whereas some low-involvement consumers were more likely to view it as an absolute and direct indicator of quality.

### **3 Personal taste**

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘taste’ was often perceived to have an objective or quasi-objective existence (Schaper, 1983). However, from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the philosophical notion that aesthetic taste was objective was in decline; instead it was increasingly seen as a personal perspective (Dickie, 1997), a perspective reflected by consumers of aesthetic products also (Bayley, 1991). The marketing literature tends not to focus too closely on the concept of personal taste. Nevertheless, the term has been referred to by informants regularly throughout this study. It is a tenet of marketing education that consumers are all different, with varying demographic, socio-cultural, psychographic and values-based backgrounds. Additionally, within the marketing literature there are allusions to taste whenever aesthetics are addressed. Thus Garvin (1987), for instance, says that it is hard to satisfy everyone in the dimension of aesthetic quality. Furthermore the subjective nature of perceived quality allows for personal factors such as taste to be an influence on the quality evaluation process. However, personal taste is not generally developed as a factor in its own right. A recent, rare example was offered by Wong and Ahuvia (1998), and even they took the concept of personal taste as a given without exploring its nature. On the other hand, from a formalised wine-tasting perspective, differences in personal taste in wine have been recognised (Jackson,

2002). These are perceived to be determined by both physiological and cultural factors (Jackson, 2002).

As this study makes clear, personal taste seems to be perceived by informants to interact closely with quality, whether or not it actually equates to it. This was initially raised by informants indirectly as an issue of motivation. Enjoyment is linked closely to flavour and thus to personal taste. The relevance of personal taste became more important when aesthetics was discussed. One of the reasons why some informants saw parallels between wine and music is that personal taste is a key precursor to preference in both. This may not mean that the qualitative evaluation of these products is entirely subjective. Nevertheless, personal taste is apparently one of the correlates which will inform that evaluation.

When dealing with aesthetic products, therefore, it may be accurate to view personal taste as one of the precursors to quality, and the model of perceived wine quality offered previously (figure 3.2) can be modified slightly to take account of this (see figure 9.1). In this revised model, personal taste becomes a correlate of the quality engagement process, having an indirect link to motivation. Specifically in wine, for instance, one can note the effect of the synthesis of physical characteristics (the physiological taste of the product) with social and cultural influences. This has been observed in the academic literature on the subject, and was addressed in one analysis of food preference:

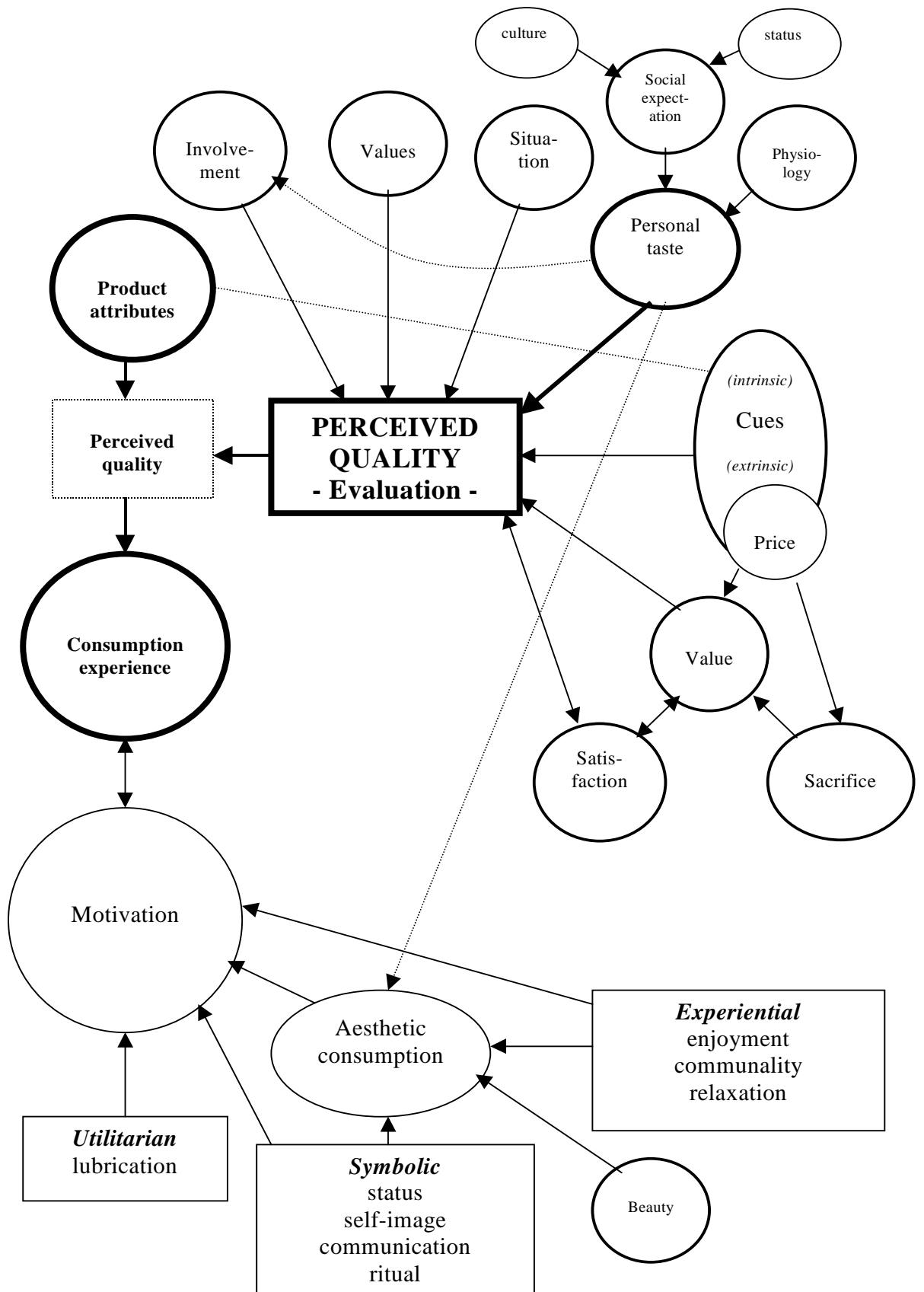
Sweetness seemed to be a major driver of preference with sweeter products preferred in blind tests but when asked for descriptor preferences sweetness was often a negative (Wright, Nancarrow, & Brace, 2000 p. 433).

Often a sweet tooth is repressed in the interests of social acceptance and acquiring cultural capital. It may be that this partly explains the demise of Liebfraumilch<sup>2</sup> and similar sweet wines. With growing sophistication in wine drinkers in the UK, such varieties offer little cultural capital and so consumers who quite like the taste move on to other wines with more kudos (Wright et al., 2000 p. 436).

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<sup>2</sup> A fairly cheap, floral and slightly sweet German wine popular in the UK from the 1960s until the early 1990s and still with a limited following.





**Figure 9.1 - Perceived wine quality: a revised model**

Consumers may physiologically tend to enjoy sweeter wines, but socially be required to express a preference for wines with less residual sugar in them. In this case the physical and the social influences act dialectically to produce a synthesis of personal taste, which will be distinct for each individual.

In developing the notion of personal taste as a correlate of wine quality three further suggestions can be made. First, personal taste has a close relationship with involvement (as noted in chapter 3, section 4.4) and also tends to lead to greater experience with favoured products. A greater understanding of a favoured product type will inevitably have an impact on one's evaluative skills (Oude Ophuis & van Trijp, 1995). It will make them more finely honed, yet at the same time rooted in subjective experience. Thus high involvement may stem from personal taste but also reinforce and modify it. Second, another characteristic of the consumer which will have an impact on personal taste is the consumer's own predisposition to focus on cognitive, sensory or affective messages in approaching products (see section 6 below). Third is the impact of cultural background on the consumer's response to the situation of wine consumption. This has been researched previously and it was noted that culture has an impact on wine consumption patterns (Hall et al., 1997). One can extrapolate from this to suggest that personal taste in wine, and therefore one's particular approach to the evaluation of its quality, will have an ethnic and cultural dimension, a point supported by research in Sweden (Nerlove, 1995).

In conclusion it can be suggested, as is implicit in the quotation from Wright et al. above, that personal taste as a correlate of quality mediates other factors with the individual's assessment of product quality. Thus the revised model of the perceived wine quality engagement (figure 9.1) shows this mediating function. It is suggested that personal taste links closely to involvement. Additionally it mediates cultural, physiological and social precursors to the process of quality engagement with a product. It also links to aesthetic consumption and thus to the symbolic and experiential purposes of consumption. It is suggested therefore that personal taste is effectively one of the main ways in which the engagement with quality connects to symbolic and experiential consumption.

The concept of personal taste, an idiosyncratic dynamic, may seem at odds with another suggestion from the findings – that there may be some consensus in the

qualitative evaluation of a wine across all ranges and backgrounds of drinkers. There is not necessarily a conflict, however. First personal taste seems driven by both social and physiological factors, both of which may tend towards producing a common (though not identical) response to an aesthetic product like wine. Second personal taste is merely one variable in the creation of quality engagement with a wine. Whilst it may tend to push the drinker in a very individual direction some of the other correlates of quality may have a propensity to lead the drinker towards a response which shares more in common with other consumers.

#### **4 The dimensions of wine quality**

Steenkamp (1989) saw quality as a unidimensional evaluation, a perspective endorsed by Zeithaml (1988). However from this study it seems clear that drinkers perceive wine quality to be a multi-dimensional concept. All except one of the informants provided a number of different dimensions to quality and for most informants the interrelation was complex, with extrinsic and intrinsic, catalytic and terminal dimensions all utilised. However, different dimensions seem to operate in different ways, with the critical distinction being between the catalytic and the terminal dimensions. Wine quality, it can be argued, is a relationship between pleasure/enjoyment and these catalysing dimensions such as gustation or potential.

Additionally, these quality dimensions often appear to have a relationship with both the motivation for drinking and the processes utilised for evaluating wine. The quality sub-dimension of taste is a good example of how this operates. 'Good taste' was offered by many informants as an experiential motivating factor for wine consumption; for some it was the paramount reason to drink. Taste also linked to food as a motivating issue, notably in the area of flavour complementarity. At the same time taste as a concept had a relationship to the impact of the situation of consumption on the process of evaluating quality. Food, it was suggested, could modify one's perceptions of a wine, and may have an impact on the effectiveness or nature of the assessment of wine quality. Thus taste as a sub-dimension of quality was linked to a key element of the motivation to consume wine and also an aspect of its evaluation. Similar relationships existed linking quality to motivational factors

and (sometimes) to evaluation for the dimensions of pleasure, complexity, interest and for the paradigmatic dimensions.

#### **4.1 Catalytic dimensions of wine quality**

As noted, most quality dimensions appear to be catalytic (or instrumental), whilst crucially pleasure seems to operate as a form of terminal quality. Some quality dimensions are closely linked to, or identical with, cues – appearance being the most obvious. Other dimensions, such as flavour and complexity, seem to be closely linked to, or abstracted from, product attributes. Others are less physical and more conceptual, such as the paradigmatic dimensions and interest.

The catalytic dimensions of wine quality are those aspects of the wine quality engagement process which relate most directly to the literature of wine tasting and appreciation. This is most apparent for the gustatory dimension, where terms like length, intensity, complexity and balance regularly recur in popular and professional wine guides (e.g., Basset, 2000; Jackson, 1997; Jackson, 2002; Schuster, 1992). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the terms used in such literature tend to be the more cognitive and less sensory of the gustatory sub-dimensions. This supports the point already made that the public discussion about wine is carried out by the highly involved and in language which only the highly involved use (Lockshin, 2002a). As some of the low-involvement informants in this study have suggested, explicitly or implicitly, they are alienated by jargon which seems, to them, to have no relationship to the wine they are drinking.

Other, non-gustatory, catalytic dimensions also reflect aspects of quality raised in the wine-related literature. Thus production methods, including faultlessness (Schuster, 1992), fitness for purpose (Schuster, 1992) and use of appropriate technical processes (Wright, 2001) were noted by some informants – even though their precise impact may not be fully understood. Additionally the paradigmatic dimensions reflected some elements of quality in the wine literature. Conformance to a regionally-defined specification, reflection of origin (terroir) and of variety have been noted by some as important to a wine's quality (Atkinson, 1999; Jackson, 1994; Merritt, 1997; Norman, 1996). Further, potential is considered by some to be an element of quality in wine (Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979). The two

latter dimensions - the paradigmatic and potential - are again cognitive, rather than sensory. This reinforces the link between high-involvement and the public discussion about the nature of wine quality in the wine literature.

The extrinsic, catalytic dimensions of quality, especially production methods, were considered important by a range of informants of all levels of involvement. The intrinsic, catalytic dimensions, however, appeared to operate as a kind of hierarchy. Different types of drinkers focused on different dimensions and sub-dimensions. Some intrinsic catalytic dimensions were most important to low-involvement informants (for example appearance and some of the gustatory sub-dimensions such as taste and smoothness). Other sub-dimensions, especially balance and concentration, were important for drinkers at all involvement levels. Yet others, the gustatory sub-dimensions of complexity and interest and the paradigmatic and potential dimensions, were only raised by medium and – especially – high-involvement drinkers.

## **4.2 The nature of pleasure**

Many, though not all, informants mentioned pleasure or enjoyment as a dimension of wine quality. Even when not explicitly mentioned, pleasure often seemed implicit in informants' words or in their response to the wines tasted if they were focus group participants. Pleasure also featured as one of the key motivations to drink even for some of those who did not rate it as a quality dimension. Pleasure was the dimension mentioned most consistently by informants from all reference groups and from the lowest to the highest level of involvement. It therefore seems that, in some form or another, pleasure is a fundamental aspect of the engagement with wine quality. However, whereas the wine-related literature regularly refers to the catalytic dimensions of the engagement with wine quality, it much less regularly considers pleasure integral to the process. Only two works, those by Amerine and Roessler (1976) and Peynaud (1987), refer explicitly to pleasure as a fundamental aspect of wine quality.

Having said that one caveat to the general proposition about the importance of pleasure should be noted. Some higher involvement drinkers, especially professionals, noted in their distinction of quality evaluation and preference that they

could assess the quality of a wine without necessarily enjoying it and still judge it highly. This could suggest two propositions: (1) That pleasure is integral to the engagement with quality and (2) that ideally - but not necessarily - it should be the pleasure of the individual engaging with the product.

It has been suggested by the results that quality is perceived to operate on a continuum, in the same way that the aesthetic experience operates on a continuum (Holbrook & Zirlin, 1985). This continuum may not merely apply to the terminal dimension of quality, for it could be argued that a wine has more or less balance, or intensity, or potential, or interest. Nevertheless, it may be that it is in the pleasure experienced that this continuum is most obvious. Holbrook and Zirlin explicitly describe the continuum as being ‘between simple aesthetic pleasure and profound’ (1985 p. 3). At the more profound end of the continuum it seems that the pleasure shown in wine shares some aspects of the ‘flow’ experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), or the intense aesthetic experience expounded by some philosophical aestheticians (Beardsley, 1980; Dickie, 1971; Sibley, 2001). At this level attention becomes focused on wine, there is a sense of intellectual challenge and emotional detachment, and personal development occurs. Such a profound response to wine seems to have been experienced occasionally by a number of informants. It seems from the comments made that some, perhaps occasionally all, of the elements of the flow experience (especially focus and challenge) occur regularly. It may be with wine that whilst the profound aesthetic experience is an occasional occurrence, a ‘moderately profound’ response, involving some but not all of the aspects of the flow experience, may be a frequent event.

## **5 Conceptualising wine quality**

The investigation of how wine quality is conceptualised has been a major theme of this study. The subjective versus objective paradigm has informed many of the research findings. In developing the exploration of the conceptualisation of wine quality two models will be offered: one based on the simple subjective/objective dichotomy, and one developing the more complex typology of quality outlined in the literature review (chapter 3, section 1.2).

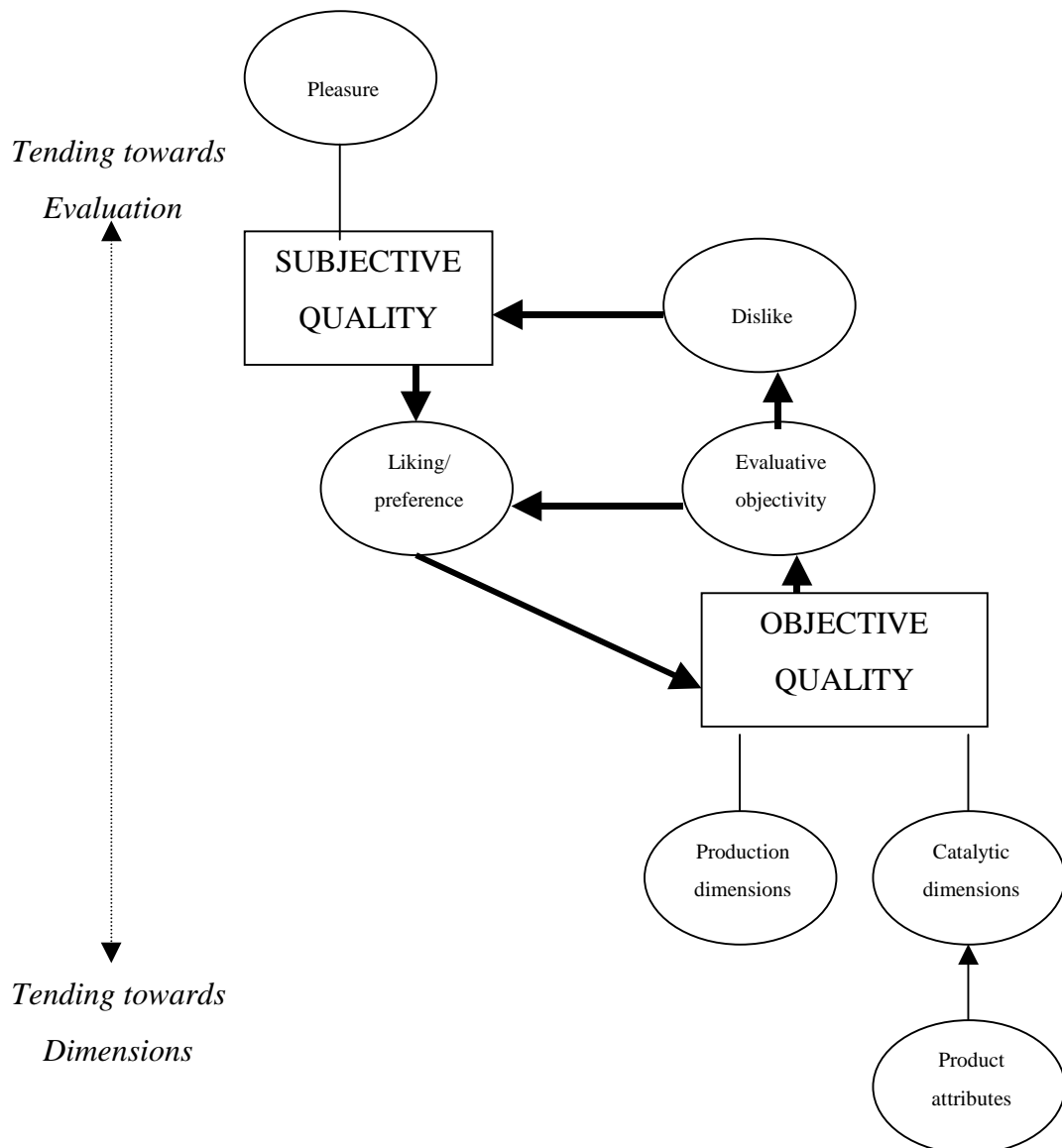
## **5.1 Managing the subjective/objective paradox**

As noted in the review of the literature, most research has focused on perceived quality and thus by definition on subjective quality, for it is the perceived aims, values and situation of the consumer which determines quality (Steenkamp, 1990). There were a number of drinkers who maintained this resolutely subjectivist perspective. They tended to be of lower involvement levels, although this group included a few high-involvement consumers and professionals. A marginally fewer number of drinkers seemed to hold a strictly objectivist perspective – that quality inheres in the wine itself. This group included a number of high-involvement consumers and – especially – professionals. Their perspective was that at least some dimensions of quality, such as balance, intensity or complexity, were externally verifiable and commonly perceptible – irrespective of who was tasting the wine.

It has been suggested occasionally in the literature that the quality perception process is more complex than a mere either/or dichotomy and involves both objective and subjective elements (Garvin, 1984). More specifically it has been proposed that quality involves an engagement between a subjective consumer and an external context, as suggested by Steenkamp (1990):

Perceived quality judgments emerge in a contextual setting and therefore cannot be located ‘inside’ the consumer as a completely subjective concept or ‘outside’ the consumer as a subject free objectivity (p. 314).

Another way to view it, therefore, would be to see quality engagement as a tension between a subjective element and an objective element. This can be visualised in graphic form (figure 9.2). This perspective was developed by many informants, including some of those who initially argued for a subjectivist position.



**Figure 9.2 – Subjective and objective quality**

In this model the catalytic quality dimensions of wine have a close relationship with product attributes. In some cases (e.g., appearance) they may seem identical to the product attributes and in others (e.g., complexity) they may be abstracted from them. Nevertheless the instrumental dimensions are objective; they exist in defined form in the product. The same can be said for the quality dimensions related to production.

Subjective quality is the core of the individual's relationship with the product, and relates closely to the quality dimension of pleasure. It is rooted in the individual's inability to have absolute certainty in the external validity of their



evaluation of the product. There are two ways in which the consumer can reconcile this paradox of the subjective and the objective. One, generally for low-involvement consumers, is to accept the existence of objective quality, but claim no ability to discern it, merely to 'know what I like'. These drinkers start from a subjectivist position but accept that objective quality exists paradoxically alongside that viewpoint. Objective quality as a means of determining preference has no relevance for them, for they cannot engage with it – they do not understand how to analyse wine's objective elements. To that extent they are divorced from objective quality. It can be suggested that the subjective element of the process tends to focus on the activity of evaluation, and the objective part tends to focus on the defined dimensions of quality. Preference relates closely to the correlate of personal taste, so that excessive oak or the use of a specific grape variety, for example, becomes important at this juncture.

The second way of reconciling this paradox was adopted by a few high-involvement consumers and many of the professionals. They approach wine systematically, with a checklist of points to be considered and/or a benchmark of what the wine should be like against which it can be evaluated. These approaches are consistent with many professional studies of wine tasting (Amerine & Roessler, 1976; Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Peynaud, 1987; Rankine, 1990). Such processes give these drinkers an 'objective' way into engagement with the product. While checklists and benchmarks offer a framework for evaluating the quality of the wine, they do not necessarily guarantee enjoyment. Thus an individual who drinks wine with this perspective starts from an objective standpoint, evaluates the wine using objective standards (marked as 'evaluative objectivity' in figure 9.2), but may reach the subjective position when they gain little pleasure, despite the wine apparently displaying the indicators of quality.

In some ways these two processes (preference and evaluative objectivity) can be seen to be a way by which wine consumers try to resolve the antinomy of taste – the paradox of personally-rooted evaluation with apparently universal judgments of products (Osborne, 1979b; Schaper, 1983). If it is accepted that individuals have a personal perspective on an aesthetic product, constrained amongst other things by personal taste, it is impossible to offer a truly objective aesthetic analysis of a product. Yet, accepting that there may be some external criteria by which the

product is judged, and applying those criteria (albeit subjectively and thus imperfectly), one may be able to contribute towards a ‘universal’ judgment of an artwork. Alternatively consumers with limited experience may lack the framework to engage with objective quality. They accept the universal judgment about a wine, that it is objectively good or bad, but rely on their own preference for a decision on whether or not they want to drink it, irrespective of that universal judgment.

## **5.2 The typology of wine quality**

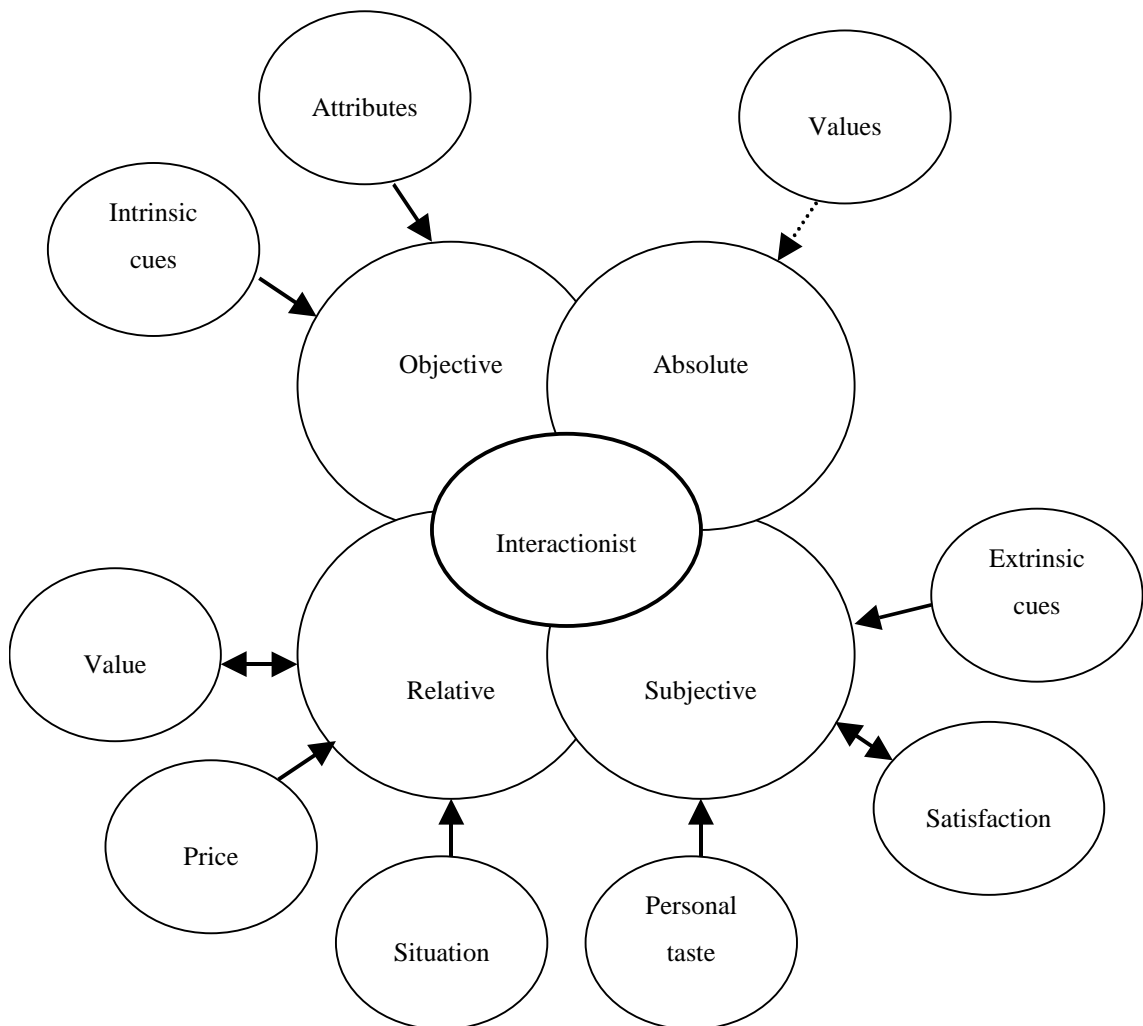
The second model for exploring wine quality can be offered by developing the typology outlined early in the literature review (figure 3.1) involving not merely objective and subjective quality, but also absolute and – crucially – relative quality. This proposed model is outlined at figure 9.3.

In this model the essence of quality can be understood via an interactionist perspective, reconciling not just the compatible approaches to quality (such as a joint absolute/objective perspective) but also the paradoxical approaches of absolute/relative and objective/subjective. At the same time each of the four types of quality mediates one or more correlates of quality in the quality formation process. Thus objective quality mediates product attributes and intrinsic cues, for these are the defined, quantifiable correlates of wine. Likewise subjective quality mediates satisfaction, personal taste and intrinsic cues (other than price) into the quality formation process, for these correlates relate closely to the individual’s personal response to the product. Relative quality is crucial in this model, for it is the point at which quality meets value, price and the situation of consumption. These three correlates are all perceived to be core precursors to quality within the marketing literature on the subject, and all allow for the existence of various ‘levels’ of quality, dependent on price, or the setting of consumption. Absolute quality, it could be posited, mediates the impact of values on the overall quality experience, for values are perhaps the correlate which most closely equate to the individual’s metaphysical outlook<sup>3</sup>. In the case of satisfaction and value (at least) the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> This is a cautious suggestion. Of all the quality correlates values was explored least in this study. This was a time-related issue because of the vastness of the subject and the fact that it seemed the most tangential of the correlates. Thus no formal laddering technique was used to relate motivation

quality and each of the correlates is a two-way process, with both of the correlates developing and being enhanced as a result of the relationship (Holbrook, 1994; Oliver, 1997; Sweeney & Soutar, 1995).



**Figure 9.3 – Quality and its correlates**

Such a model develops ideas hinted at by some researchers for quality (Steenkamp, 1990), or, in one instance, for value (Holbrook, 1994). However, as already suggested, the focus on perceived quality has concentrated attention on the subjective component of the typology. Paradoxes and their possible resolution are

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and quality perceptions to individuals' values. Nevertheless it seemed that personal values were implicit in certain aspects of the consumption experience. Note particularly chapter 6, section 1.4.

not especially popular for marketing pragmatists, but as a means of understanding how consumers may maintain a series of apparently contradictory ideas about the nature of quality this does offer a way forward. Importantly it also gives some suggestions about how the different quality correlates, often of a substantially varying conceptual nature, are integrated into the overall process.

Crucially, this possibility, in outline, if not in detail, was offered by a number of informants. For instance some made comments about being ‘as objective as possible in a subjective field’. Others suggested quantifying quality as, say, 70 per cent objective and 30 per cent that is personal. These ideas seem to show some wine drinkers explicitly expressing a paradoxical position which is only resolved by an interactionist approach.

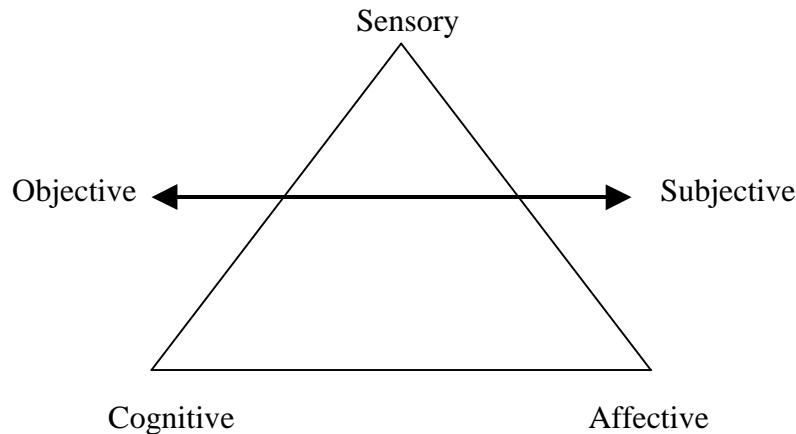
## **6 The psychophysical approach to drinking wine**

The literature on aesthetics – both philosophical and psychological - is uncertain whether or not an aesthetic experience is essentially a cognitive or affective event (Dickie, 1997; Funch, 1997), or even if it has a sensory dimension (Coleman, 1965). This split has been reflected in research into consumer aesthetics, with some apparently tending towards an essentially cognitive approach (for instance Wallendorf et al., 1980) and others appearing to focus on an affective stance (Holbrook, 1981).

It seems clear from this study that, for wine at least, all three approaches to wine quality have relevance. Informants talked about the taste of wine, an initially physiological response. Some extrapolated from that to refer to wine’s sensuous nature. They also discussed the importance of complexity and interest as dimensions of wine quality, thus referring to the cognitive approach. Additionally they regularly ‘liked’ or ‘disliked’ a wine which, especially in the context of the quality dimension of pleasure, denoted an affective response. This conclusion accords with Holbrook’s (1995) study of the impact of variable rhythm, tempo, dynamics and phrasing on perceptions of music, which concluded that each of these (auditory – thus sensory) variables influence perceptions (cognition) which in turn has an impact on affect. The current study would not necessarily invariably order the three in that way,

although it is a logical sequence and may be a common response to wine. However, the study does support the idea that all three operate in the evaluative process. Like the quality dimensions, this triadic approach to wine drinking was not just a feature of how drinkers assessed wine. It also featured in their motivation to drink, and in their understanding of wine quality dimensions. Thus enjoyment, as a factor motivating consumption, had elements that were affective (pleasurable), sensory (flavourful) and cognitive (challenge and knowledge). It seems that the three approaches are interrelated. The sensory element of complex taste stimulates the cognitive motivation of intellectual challenge which in turn inspires the affective enjoyment of the wine. This threefold approach also featured when discussion turned to explicitly aesthetic issues. A number of informants made the connection between the consumption of wine and of music because both stimulated (affective) pleasure. Some noted the similarity of (cognitive) evaluation processes. Some also talked about the sensuous nature of both. Such a perspective has recently received some support from research into the physiology of tasting. This research, analysing brain activity during tasting, noted differences between the more cognitive approach adopted by sommeliers compared with the less cognitive responses made by 'casual drinkers' (Styles, 2003). Expert drinkers revealed neural activity in the frontal cortices – those parts of the brain utilised for cognitive processes.

Thus the psychophysical approaches to wine consumption in triadic form can be shown graphically (figure 9.4).



**Figure 9.4 – The cognitive, sensory, affective approach to drinking**

As set out here, the three approaches can be used individually or, more commonly, in some combination when drinking wine. The suggestion is also made that the triad operates on an objective/subjective axis. Cognition tends to deal with more objective responses to wine, affect focuses on the subjective dimension of pleasure, whereas sensation has elements of both, including both mental analysis of the physiological response and an emotional attraction/repulsion.

It is important to note that all elements of this triadic approach to consumption and to quality evaluation may be utilised by any drinker but that some drinkers may focus more on one approach than the other. Thus it has been suggested in the findings that MEs, especially males, tended to be especially cognitive both in analysing their motivation to drink and in their approach to the evaluation of quality. It also concurs with research done by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) which examined the views of art gallery and museum curators on aesthetics. They noted four ‘dimensions’ of the aesthetic experience, the first three of which comprised:

A perceptual response, which concentrated on elements such as balance, form and harmony; an emotional response, which emphasized reactions to the emotional content of the work and personal associations; an intellectual response, which focused on theoretical and art-history questions (1990 p. 28).

These three aspects of the experience are similar to the sensory (immediate perceptual), affective and cognitive approaches to wine. Csikszentmihalyi and

Robinson then commented that some of their informants would only talk in cognitive terms, yet others thought that cognition was secondary to the sensory or affective aspects of the experience. However:

Even those who gave a prominent place to the intellectual experience often stressed the fact that cognitive processes tended to come into play for them only after the work had made its impact on a perceptual or emotional ... level (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990 p. 41).

Thus although the importance of the three approaches appears less readily acknowledged within philosophical aesthetics, this study supports the conclusions of some others who have investigated the aesthetic experience and concluded that sensation, cognition and emotion all play a role.

It is necessary to stress that this proposition is a simple, apparently precise analysis of what is in practice a complex, interactive process. A sensory response may be instantaneous before the drinker begins to feel pleasure in the wine or think about its complexity, or balance, or concentration. Likewise with some (generally higher-involvement) drinkers observed in the focus groups, a cognitive analysis appeared to occur before any sense of pleasure developed and the cognitive reaction often seemed to reinforce and develop the momentary sensation and the pleasure. It is not possible to categorise informants as being only cognitive, or sensory, or affective. Each approach may have had different weighting for varying informants, however, and all will have interacted in a very intricate manner.

## **7 The quality perception process for wine**

A number of ideas have been suggested from the findings surrounding drinkers' perceptions of wine quality. These include approaches to quality, its conceptualisation and dimensions, and the importance of involvement in each of these elements of the concept. Is it possible to integrate all of these into a single quality perception process?

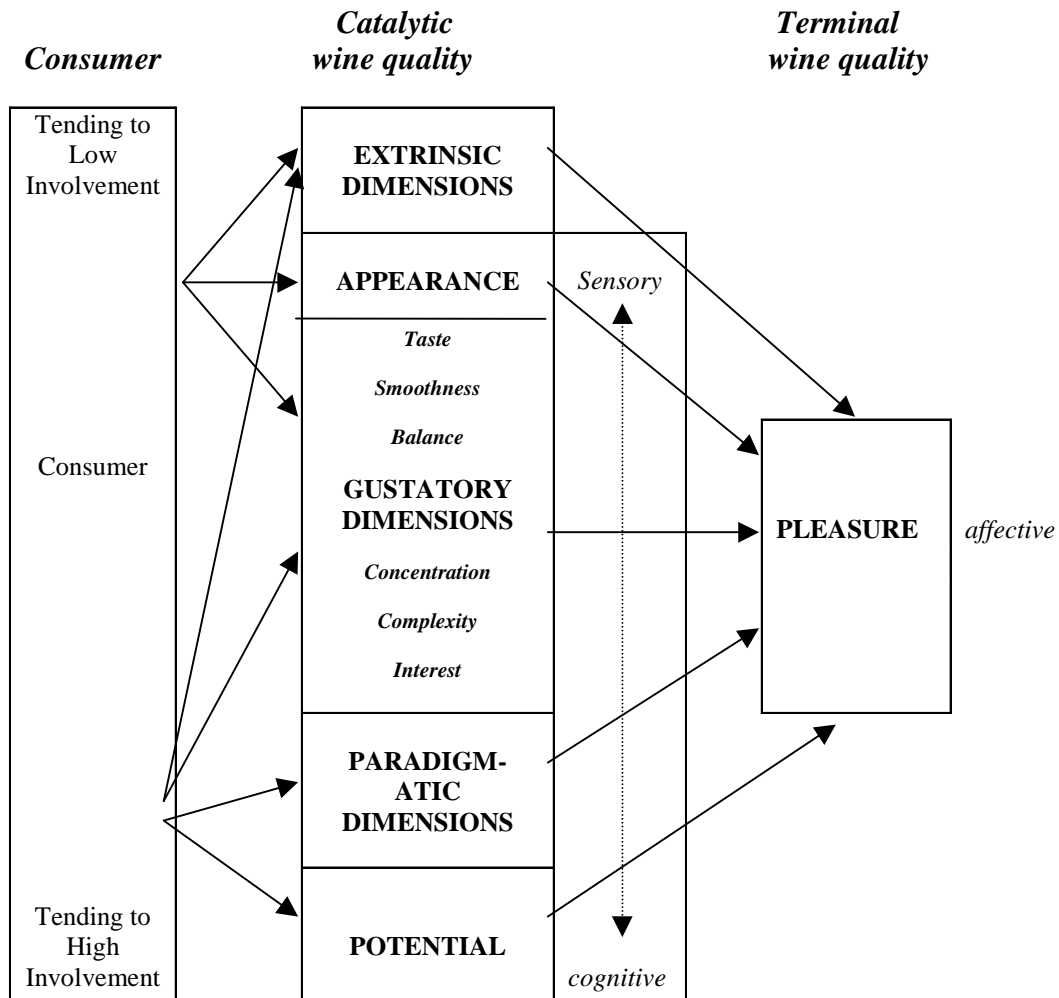
A series of factors would be relevant to any integrated approach. First is the consumer, who has an involvement level ranging between low and high. The consumer's initial engagement with wine deals with, at least in quality terms, the catalytic dimensions of wine quality. There is, as the discussion on involvement

above suggests, an implication that some catalytic dimensions of wine quality are utilised more by lower involvement drinkers and some by higher involvement drinkers.

The extrinsic dimensions of catalytic wine quality are important in the wine quality engagement process but of a somewhat different nature. They are adopted by drinkers at all levels of involvement, and they seem to be necessary but not sufficient to catalyse terminal quality. Ultimately a series of propositions can be suggested: (1) All the intrinsic, catalytic dimensions of wine quality are capable of leading to terminal quality (pleasure). In the event that the catalytic dimensions are insufficient, then there will be no terminal pleasure and thus an evaluation that quality is absent. (2) Not every catalytic dimension will be used by every drinker, nor will any individual necessarily use the same catalytic dimensions on every occasion, but they are all potentially available to each drinker. (3) The number of catalytic dimensions which register with the drinker will have an impact on the level of pleasure, and therefore on the level of quality. As an example, one could suggest that a wine that looks attractive, has fairly intense flavours which the drinker finds pleasant but is not entirely smooth (perhaps the tannins are a bit coarse) will be of moderate quality. A wine which has all of those components but fine tannins and very long length will be perceived to be of quite high quality.

This process is exemplified in figure 9.5. This figure starts at the left with the consumer, then moves on to the catalytic wine dimensions (showing for illustrative purposes some, but not all, of the gustatory sub-dimensions). The figure then ends at the right with the terminal dimension of quality – pleasure.





**Figure 9.5 - A model of the wine quality engagement process**

For ease of comprehension it has been assumed that the consumer is either high or low involvement but, if the argument in section 2 above is accepted, there is actually a full range of potential involvement levels. Each of these involvement levels could utilise an assortment of catalytic wine quality dimensions. Thus all consumers may make equal use of the extrinsic dimensions of wine quality (especially those relating to production). The lower involvement consumer is more likely to focus on appearance and, particularly, some of the gustatory dimensions such as taste, smoothness and balance. The higher involvement drinker may focus on some of the same gustatory sub-dimensions, such as balance – but also on others like complexity or interest.

Having noted that the extrinsic dimensions are slightly different in the quality engagement process (because they may be used by all types of consumer equally), it can be suggested that the triadic cognitive/sensory/affective analysis of the approach to wine consumption can be overlaid on this model. The intrinsic, catalytic quality dimensions at the top of the model tend to be more sensory in operation. Thus appearance as a dimension of quality is about the visual, almost visceral response to the depth and hue of the wine's colour. (This is in contradistinction to the operation of appearance as a cue, when it may be used very cognitively to indicate the age or condition of the wine, or the grape variety, or production methods used). Likewise the most widely used gustatory sub-dimensions (taste, smoothness) are very much about an instinctive sensory response to the wine. The least used sub-dimensions, complexity and interest, are highly cognitive. Those 'in the middle', balance and concentration, which are quite widely adopted, have elements that are both sensory and cognitive. The length of a wine's finish, for instance, is something one senses after the wine has been swallowed, but which also requires some cognitive recognition.

One can extend this further by suggesting that the affective point of the triadic analysis of approach (figure 9.4) tends to link closely with pleasure – a felt response to consumption. It is important to note, however, that this is a simplified explanation of what is in practice complex. As suggested above, the relationship between the three approaches is interactive, with each tending to reinforce the other in operation.

## **8 The quality perception process for aesthetic goods**

This study has offered some support for the idea that wine is an aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic product. It has been suggested that the consumption of wine is substantially aesthetic because it focuses on beauty and that it is capable of providing intrinsic aesthetic value. Crucially most of the drinkers interviewed in the study perceive similarities to other aesthetic products. These similarities centre on the importance of personal taste, the role of evaluation (including cognitive processes dealing with catalytic quality) and the pleasurable response (terminal quality) which they engender. Additionally for some informants both wine and music are 'created'

or ‘interpreted’, giving them the status of artwork. It is therefore interesting to consider whether or not this examination of wine quality can offer any ideas about the quality engagement process during aesthetic consumption generally.

### **8.1 The dimensions of aesthetic quality engagement**

The wine quality engagement process as outlined above is discrete to wine. Whilst terminal quality, pleasure, enjoyment and positive affective response, may be shared in the consumption of many things, including aesthetic and other experiential products, the catalytic dimensions are clearly discrete to wine<sup>4</sup>. Merely to say that what is common to the experience of quality in aesthetic products is pleasure is essentially platitudinous and hardly defines aesthetic products, for the same could be said of any positive experiential consumption experience. What is of interest, however, is whether or not there is anything common which can be abstracted from those catalytic dimensions which marks out the diverse range of products that focus on conveying ‘beauty’.

One way may be to build on the framework of Beardsley’s (1980) concept of the ‘general canons’ of aesthetic evaluation<sup>5</sup>. Beardsley argued that the general canons are rules which apply to all works of art. He distinguished them from other, product-specific evaluative criteria (sometimes termed ‘regional’ (Sibley, 2001)). Thus a piece of music needs to show appropriate tempo, melody and harmony – terms which cannot be applied to a painting, poem or wine. However, the interpretation of these product-specific criteria involves assessing their integration or balance, their intensity and their complexity – criteria that might be applicable to all aesthetic products.

Adopting this approach would see the catalytic dimensions of wine quality ‘interpreted’ aesthetically. As noted in chapter 3, Beardsley’s (1980) general canons

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<sup>4</sup> Many or all of the catalytic dimensions may be common to other products, such as beer or a meal. However, it is argued that the particular configuration outlined in this study only operates for wine.

<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out that Beardsley explicitly excluded wine and fine food from being capable of aesthetic evaluation. His conclusion has been contested by other philosophers (Coleman, 1965; Korsmeyer, 1999; Osborne, 1977; Railton, 1998). Beardsley’s perspective does not, in itself, negate the argument developed in this section.

comprised intensity, unity (also interpreted as balance – the harmony of the component parts) and complexity. It was suggested in chapter 3 that these general canons were also mirrored in the literature on psychological aesthetics (Arnheim, 1974; Berlyne, 1974; McBride, 1990) and on aesthetic consumption (Holbrook, 1980).

It can be noted at this point that each of the general canons have already been identified by informants as product-specific catalytic wine quality dimensions. Thus balance, intensity and complexity are included alongside the regional evaluative criteria of appearance, taste and ageing potential. This, however, does not preclude their operation as quality indicators both for wine and more generally for other aesthetic products.

### ***8.1.1 Distinctiveness and interest***

Before integrating Beardsley's general canons into the wine quality engagement process it is worth considering whether or not the general canons are sufficient for this process. If any others are admitted then they must be both applicable to the aesthetic consumption of any product and they must also be necessary to the delineation of the aesthetic quality of that product.

One might - from the work of psychologists on the subject – be tempted to add another general canon to the three offered by Beardsley; that of distinctiveness, which includes the related aspects of character (McBride, 1990), novelty (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) and the surprising (Child, 1969)<sup>6</sup>. Alternatively, as suggested in this study, as a gustatory sub-dimension of quality interest can be seen as having a close connection to distinctiveness. One can note here the suggestion of Holbrook (1995) that 'profound aesthetic experience', especially, may result in part from a dialectical process of 'structure-departure-

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<sup>6</sup> Beardsley himself would have not accepted this, arguing firmly that there are only three general canons (Beardsley, 1980). Other philosophers of aesthetics have subsequently disputed this and argued that others may exist (Dickie, 1997; Sibley, 2001). Philosophers have not acknowledged distinctiveness as an evaluative dimension of aesthetic quality, although some have referred to novelty. (e.g., Cothey, 1990). Originality has often been considered a key element of an artwork – but even that claim is disputed (Osborne, 1979a). It has been suggested that Kant acknowledged uniqueness as a 'formal element in aesthetic interest' (Scruton, 1974 p. 23).

reconciliation', which results in a deep emotional response (1995 p. 37). This could, in some circumstances, be interpreted as the factor which makes a product different. Wallendorf et al. (1980) referred to this factor as surprise, and considered it part of a successful aesthetic encounter.

Evidence for the existence of this concept of distinctiveness or interest, at least in regard to wine, comes from the comments of informants on the topic. Some informants spontaneously suggested that distinctiveness or interest had a relevance to wine quality and others, when asked, subsequently concurred with that suggestion. Even when distinctiveness was not considered essential to wine quality, informants would suggest memorableness or some similar term to mark out the uniqueness and interest provided by a wine. There is also some evidence from wine literature that distinctiveness is perceived by both critics and producers to be an element of quality (Basset, 2000; Grahm, 2003). Likewise the noted US wine critic, Robert Parker, has suggested that interest and personality may be essential to the very best wines (Parker, 1997), and the oenologist Jackson posits that interest and memorableness are also important (Jackson, 2002).

One can see how this may operate in music. The pianist Glenn Gould recorded two piano interpretations of Bach's Goldberg Variations; one in 1955 and the second in 1981. Both may have the other dimensions of quality (intensity, complexity and unity/balance) but what makes them especially sought after is their distinctiveness. The earlier version, recorded when he was young, took under 39 minutes to play. The second version, made just before his death, was perceived to be the work of a mature man and was played in just over 51 minutes (Cline, 2002). Both may be argued to have elements of quality, but their distinctiveness, both in timing and the respective maturity of interpretation could be argued to add an extra dimension to that quality.

### ***8.1.2 Technical acceptability***

A further addition to Beardsley's three general canons of unity, complexity and intensity may also be needed. This suggestion is based less on the literature on the subject of aesthetic value and more on the data offered by this research. It seems apparent that, from the evidence of informants, appropriate production methods are

integral to the quality of a wine, at least as a prerequisite for the other quality dimensions to operate. By extension it can be suggested that some form of technical competence is integral to aesthetic quality.

One can explore this further with wine. All the balance, intensity or complexity available will not guarantee quality if a wine is riddled with volatile acidity or cork taint. The comments made by informants that a wine should be fault-free, fit for its purpose, or produced according to specification all seem to act as a precursor to the successful operation of other wine quality dimensions. At the same time it should be noted that it is not necessarily technical perfection which was required. The point was made by some informants that ‘recipe’ wines could be bland and boring and that an occasional, minor, technical lapse could actually add interest to the wine. Thus it could be posited that whilst technical perfection is not essential as a dimension of wine quality, technical acceptability is; the wine must attain a basic minimum standard of fruit flavour, without any dominant faults which mar it<sup>7</sup>.

This idea of technical acceptability could possibly be extended to all forms of aesthetic consumption. It can be suggested that any work of art requires a basic level of technical acceptability. A painter must show essential control of line and colour, a pianist of timbre and tempo. Minor lapses (a fluctuation in timing) or variations from a norm (a cadenza) may add interest, and can be tolerated but – depending on the musical form - interpolated discords may not be. In the example given above of the pianist Glenn Gould it has been noted that he modified the composer’s original score by adding in repeat verses – a technique that Bach ‘did not approve of’ (Cline, 2002 paragraph 3). Nevertheless this technical variation, even lapse - has been perceived to add to the quality of the interpretation.

Technical acceptability, however, is slightly different from the other general canons. They are things with which consumers positively engage – which arouse excitement and interest. Technical acceptability is unlikely to inspire such a response. It seems to be more a prerequisite for the other general canons or perhaps

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<sup>7</sup> Pre-modern aesthetic theorists, such as Plato and Aquinas, would not have accepted this, claiming that perfection was essential to the aesthetic object (Dickie, 1971; Plato, n.d./1951). Modern theorists have paid less attention to the criteria of good aesthetic technique.



relate to Beardsley's (1980) general canons, but may perhaps more aptly be considered as 'catalytic dimensions of aesthetic quality'. Technical acceptability is included, but in a slightly different way, as it is used to underpin the other four aesthetic catalytic dimensions rather than functioning alongside them. The process appears complex, but in operation is fairly straightforward, as will be explained below.

### ***8.2.1 Linking product specific and aesthetic quality dimensions***

The product-specific catalytic dimensions of wine quality interact in different ways with the general aesthetic dimensions. Extrinsic wine quality dimensions, especially grape quality and production processes, may have an impact on the intensity and balance of the wine (and possibly its complexity as well) but critically they function as precursors to the technical acceptability of the product. Appearance informs the aesthetic dimension of intensity, as do some of the other gustatory sub-dimensions. However, most important as a precursor for intensity (as a catalytic aesthetic dimension) is the gustatory sub-dimension of wine intensity which is very similar to it. Likewise the key determinant of the aesthetic dimension of unity is the wine quality sub-dimension of balance, although other gustatory dimensions, and appearance, may also be precursors to this. The paradigmatic dimension of wine quality and, crucially, the complexity sub-dimension lead to complexity as a general catalytic aesthetic quality dimension. The paradigmatic and potential wine quality dimensions also feed into the aesthetic dimension of distinctiveness, but the dominant factor here is the relationship of the wine quality sub-dimension of interest to the aesthetic dimension.

The cognitive/sensory/affective triad remains superimposed on the model but now on the aesthetic quality dimensions<sup>8</sup>. Intensity is the most sensory of these dimensions, and distinctiveness the most cognitive. Pleasure – the terminal quality dimension – tends towards the affective.

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<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the cognitive/sensory/affective triadic approach is relevant to other aesthetic products. With some, like music and poetry, there may be a substantial sensory element in the engagement with the product. This is less true for painting, and even less relevant for, say, a novel. Arguably with the latter the more cognitive catalytic dimensions assume greater relevance.



### ***8.2.2 The operation of the catalytic dimensions of aesthetic quality***

One other component has been added to this model. It is suggested that the top catalytic aesthetic quality dimensions (intensity and unity/balance) are the core dimensions in two ways. First, they are the easiest for low-involvement consumers to engage with. The intensity and unity ('smoothness', balance) of a wine are more sensory, and more instantly perceived. They require less cognitive processing and thus less background knowledge and experience. Complexity and, particularly, distinctiveness need a broad experience with the product type and a series of comparative frameworks. Such knowledge is not normally available to the average consumer of sculpture, music or wine. This is supported by some previous studies on the impact of complexity in aesthetic consumption (Wallendorf et al., 1980).

Related to this is another hypothesis that the more cognitive aesthetic dimensions are used to make judgments about products at higher perceived quality levels. Thus a moderately good painting or poem should show elements of balance and intensity (plus any product-specific catalytic dimensions which may be relevant). However, what marks out the higher quality works is first complexity, and then, for the very highest, distinctiveness. Indeed, one could argue that an aesthetic product may be of high quality without necessarily being distinctive, but that to be of the very highest quality it must show dimensions which tend to make it unique. In the case of wine, those may include the reflection of a specific vineyard site or use of an almost unknown grape variety. However, the cognitive element engaged at this point may make distinctiveness less attractive as a criterion for lower-involvement consumers to use. This may explain why some studies have suggested that novelty is – in part at least - unwelcome as an element in aesthetic consumption (Holbrook, 1995). In practice it is likely to be lower involvement consumers who will find novelty difficult to appreciate or accept.

Note that this model offers a means of engaging with quality that is appropriate to all consumers. It does not require a distinction between novices and experts, or professionals and amateurs. Rather it suggests that consumers with different backgrounds may place varying emphases on the relevant dimensions. Nevertheless, it also presupposes that the most knowledgeable consumer, able to assess the distinctiveness of a product instantly, also needs to engage with, and be

satisfied by, each of the other more sensory dimensions of aesthetic quality in order to attain terminal quality. This could offer a partial explanation of the reason why experts and amateurs may – occasionally at least - share similar responses to aesthetic goods (Solomon et al., 1984). This consensus of response has also been cautiously noted in Holbrook's examination of popular and expert responses to movies (Holbrook, 1999b). In that study the existence of 'shared tastes' was suggested by the data despite the fact that, at least with films, 'ordinary consumers and professional critics rely on at least some differing as opposed to shared standards of evaluation' (1999b p. 153). This proposition from the findings is an especially tentative area of a generally tentative discussion. However it may be useful as one possible model for seeing a common evaluative mechanism transferable across a range of aesthetic products.

# **CHAPTER 10:**

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study has examined the drinkers' understanding of wine quality. It has considered how that quality is conceptualised noting different ways in which it is understood (crucially considering its potentially subjective and/or objective nature). It has also attempted to break down the components of wine quality, noting its different dimensions, and their relevance to different drinkers. Additionally it has considered how wine quality is evaluated. Each of these issues has been considered and developed within the drinkers' understanding of the partially aesthetic nature of wine; each of them has also been related to the varying levels of involvement which drinkers may display. The study utilised qualitative methods, specifically those which allowed informants to explain and develop their views on quality, yet which also provided for some observational assessment and probing of less cognitive perspectives. This chapter therefore summarises the key elements of those conclusions, within the context of the perspective of both marketing academics and wine industry professionals. It also suggests some managerial implications of the study, develops themes arising which would be suitable for further research, and notes the limitations of what has been undertaken.

### **1 Conclusions**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Within the discipline of marketing perceived quality is the dominant paradigm for understanding quality. The most comprehensive studies of perceived quality (Garvin, 1987; Holbrook & Corfman, 1985; Steenkamp, 1989; Zeithaml, 1988) have tended to categorise it as a higher level, probably uni-dimensional idiosyncratic abstraction. It is considered to involve the assessment of attributes within the context of a series of correlates, resulting in a consumer's individual

evaluation of a product. The correlates of quality are thought to include cues (the most important correlate for many consumer researchers), value, and satisfaction. Less well investigated, but still recognised as important, are situation, involvement and values. These correlates have been applied to products generally. The nature of perceived quality within aesthetic products specifically has rarely been subjected to a detailed analysis.

The wine industry, including both academics and more popular commentators, has a perspective on quality which is less defined theoretically but possibly more precise in practice. However, that precision maintains a number of often competing views on how wine quality can be determined. These include scientific analysis (e.g., Abbott et al., 1991; Somers, 1998), various applications of evaluative tasting by gatekeepers (for instance through journalistic media (Merritt, 1997) or wine shows (Halliday, 2001; Hooke, 2001)) and extrinsic classifications which seek to link the wine's quality to its origin (Atkinson, 1999; Norman, 1996) or to price (Markham, 1998; Oliver, 2000). There is an abundant literature advising the consumer how to look for quality in wine (e.g., Basset, 2000; Broadbent, 1979; Schuster, 1992), but that literature is often narrowly focused in its outlook and informed by high-involvement perspectives.

## **1.2 The findings of this study**

### ***1.2.1 The context of wine quality***

The findings of this study indicate that consumers typically find the nature of wine quality difficult to grasp. This is an unsurprising conclusion and reflects the difficulty expressed by academics in dealing with the same topic (Sweeney & Soutar, 1995; Zeithaml, 1988). However, this difficulty faced by consumers appears sometimes to have been overlooked in studies on the subject. By extension it is likely that the idea of quality in any aesthetic product is hard for most consumers to grapple with.

This difficulty in comprehending wine quality has two practical outworkings. The first is that many elements of quality produce ambivalence, even negativity, amongst some drinkers. This applies to the nature of quality itself and to various

issues surrounding its evaluation and its relevance. Consumers may, therefore, conclude that evaluating quality has no relevance to them, nor little applicability to their purchase decisions.

The other outworking of this difficulty, and a key conclusion of this study, is that drinkers at all levels of involvement share widely differing perspectives on quality. This is obvious in the different quality dimensions which they rely on and in the psychophysical approach which they adopt during the process of drinking and the evaluation of quality. Critically this diversity of outlook is of most relevance when examining drinkers' conceptualisations of quality. The varying conceptualisations, in their diversity, reflect the different categories of quality suggested by Steenkamp (1989; 1990) as outlined in chapter 3 (section 1.1). Some informants consider wine quality to be objective; it has externally verifiable dimensions which can be used to classify a wine whether or not the individual can actually grasp those dimensions. Other informants see quality as being firmly subjective. Yet others, as discussed in the previous chapter, merge both points of view by using preference in distinction to quality. Additionally some take a relativist perspective on quality – that it exists in tandem with the correlates of quality. This last view may be held either with or without one of the previous conceptual frameworks. As a practical solution to this confusion it may be easiest to view wine quality as an interactionist process, balancing all of these perspectives. However, with a very few exceptions that is not how drinkers themselves tend to view the issue. It can also be suggested that, whilst the marketing perspective is that perceived quality is an idiosyncratic process, many wine drinkers may not perceive it that way.

In this study quality was originally defined, in chapter 2, as both excellence and superiority. It seems likely that wine drinkers use both concepts. The former is a more absolute view of quality; the latter a relativist position. This split definition also became evident in the processes of evaluating wine, where some preferred to view a wine in isolation to appraise it while others found that process easier if a wine was part of a group being assessed. It could also be argued that this superiority/excellence dichotomy existed in the benchmark or checklist method of appraising quality. The former in essence is comparative and the latter treats each wine in isolation, with its quality existing (or not) discretely.

### ***1.2.2 The aesthetic context of wine quality***

The study suggests that the consumption of wine shares, in part at least, elements in common with ‘aesthetic’ products. It also supports the suggestion of some consumer researchers that products are not dichotomously aesthetic/non-aesthetic, but tend to exist on a continuum (Bloch, Brunel, & Arnold, 2003). In philosophical terms this tends to conflict with the more ‘purist’ approach of some aestheticians, who would limit the aesthetic experience to what may be defined as ‘high art’ (Kant, 1790/1987; Scruton, 1979), which has created the clear-cut division whereby products are either aesthetic or not, with no interim position. Instead, the perspective of this study accords with those who would take a broader view of what may or may not excite an aesthetic response, both philosophically (Sibley, 2001) and psychologically (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), and allows for differing levels of aesthetic response.

The research also suggests that wine consumers, at least, see pleasure as a key component of the aesthetic experience. This also tends to conflict with some of the more traditional aesthetic commentators, who claim that the aesthetic response is merely cognitive and mentally evaluative (Arnheim, 1974; Arnheim, 1988; Kant, 1790/1987; Scruton, 1979). Rather this study suggests support for the perspective of those who allow for a more emotional element in the aesthetic response (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Hume, 1757/1998).

The study also suggests that the experiences detailed by the informants which reveal an aesthetic component in the response to wine, at the same time situate that experience within a social context. This viewpoint contradicts the philosophical perspective of disinterested attention (Kant, 1790/1987), or what some psychologists have termed psychical distance (Cupchik, 2002), as outlined in chapter 2, section 4.3.1. Disinterested attention assumes that the aesthetic response allows no extrinsic purpose to the experience; that there is no personal gain nor other social purpose to the event. This notion has been introduced into consumer research by Holbrook and Zirlin (1985). However, instead of aesthetic experience taking place in isolation from the world beyond it can be posited from this research that it is situated firmly in the world, tending to support those aestheticians who dispute the idea of disinterested attention (Dickie, 1964; Osborne, 1979). Wine consumption, it seems, can offer

aesthetic pleasure by means of a series of evaluative processes (catalytic dimensions) yet contemporaneously enhance food, stimulate friendship and boost one's self-esteem.

Finally, the study tentatively suggests that there may be some common approaches to a number of products with an aesthetic component to them. This idea is based on a development of Beardsley's general canons (Beardsley, 1980), and offers a series of five catalytic quality dimensions which may apply across a range of aesthetic and quasi-aesthetic products, allowing for common general criteria for their evaluation.

### ***1.2.3 The precursors of wine quality***

It appears likely that – for wine at least - quality exists not merely in relation to consumption *per se* but also to motivation. Pleasure, taste and challenge were issues raised repeatedly in the context of why the informants drink wine. Additionally many of the symbolic forms of motivation – such as lifestyle, memory and status-related issues - were implicitly raised in the context of the dimensions of quality. The appreciation of wine relates not just to what is drunk, but also why it is drunk and how that motivation may be satisfied.

The academic view of perceived quality maintains that correlates – especially cues, with price being the key cue – are important. Inevitably this research supports that view but with some qualifications. First, the findings tend to support those researchers who suggest that the operation of price as a cue is complex (Teas & Agarwal, 2000). In this study it seems to be occasionally a direct cue, often it sets a framework for purchase, and at other times it may be an index or symbol for quality. Two other key conclusions about wine quality correlates can be suggested. The first is that personal taste is a key specific quality correlate, with its own precursors and operating with links to other aspects of the consumption experience, especially involvement and the entire, nebulous aspect of aesthetic consumption. The second conclusion relates to the appearance of the wine. This acts ambiguously, with some seeing it as no more than an indicative cue, others arguing that it is a precise predictor of quality, and a few seeing it as a specific dimension of quality itself. It can also be suggested that, at the point of consumption, many of the correlates,

especially cues, may cease to operate externally to quality and instead may integrate into it via the elements of subjective, objective or relative quality.

As a correlate, situation appears to have a vital impact on how wine quality is assessed. There is a clear link here between motivation (where the situational context of consumption, relating to issues like food and social setting, appears important) and to evaluation, where again environment and food seem to be significant. For a few informants wine quality itself appeared to vary with situation but for most it was evaluative ability which varied according to the situation. For the majority, however, food had a key, though ambiguous, impact on evaluation. On the one hand it could cloud the efficiency of the palate, making precise evaluation difficult. On the other hand many saw food and wine as being linked, and felt that each benefited by the partnership, so that together they each revealed more of what they had to offer.

Another crucial suggestion of this research is that drinkers appear to take different psychophysical approaches to quality. This conclusion must be treated tentatively; it has not been examined experimentally, nor has it been integrated into any psychological metaframework. Nevertheless the language used by informants ('I think', 'I feel', 'I taste/smell') implies different processes are at work, and observation of the focus group participants suggested that people use different approaches at different times. Thus one drinker could focus on sensory approaches during one consumption experience and on other occasions would use a more cognitive approach. This apparent variety of approach and of emphasis by informants suggests variation in the way they dealt with quality as an issue; some placing more emphasis on cognitive dimensions and others giving more weight to the sensory or to the affective. This, however, was no more than a tendency; there seems no doubt that elements of the sensory were important to all, and that some cognitive mechanisms were adopted by all or most. Almost invariably, also, all drinkers would record a definite affective response, whether positive or negative.

Involvement seems fundamental to the issue of understanding wine quality, a conclusion which reinforces the work of Lockshin and his colleagues in stressing its relevance to wine consumption (Lockshin, 2002b; Lockshin et al., 2001; Lockshin & Spawton, 2001; Lockshin et al., 1997). It tends to inform the psychophysical



approach to wine consumption, and consequently has an impact on which of the catalytic quality dimensions the drinker focuses on. High involvement seems to impart knowledge and expertise (though of course it may also result from it). This gives the drinker confidence in dealing with the more cognitive aspects of engaging with an aesthetic product like wine. It also seems to have a limited relationship to the conceptualisation of wine quality. Certainly whilst consumers of all involvement levels were prepared to adopt a subjectivist approach, only those with high product involvement appeared to opt for an objectivist perspective. These high-involvement drinkers were also more likely to entertain an interactionist outlook.

Involvement furthermore appeared to have an impact on the process of evaluating wine, with some cues like origin tending to be adopted by the highly involved, and others, such as price, by low-involvement consumers. The low-involvement consumers were also more likely to view appearance as an absolute indicator of quality. Critically involvement seems to have a close link to the drinker's engagement with the aesthetic dimension of wine, with high-involvement drinkers showing a greater tendency to have a profound experience with the product. Whether this was a cause of their involvement level or a result of it, or both, remains to be investigated.

#### ***1.2.4 The nature and evaluation of wine quality***

In contradiction of the definition of quality given by some consumer researchers (e.g., Steenkamp, 1990), wine quality appears to be treated multidimensionally by drinkers. The key distinction is between catalytic and terminal quality; the former dimensions act as indicators to quality and the latter dimension is an affective, evaluative response.

The findings of this study suggest that the catalytic indicators of quality are closely related to product attributes and other correlates, and that pleasure is an experiential consumption response. Thus another way of viewing quality would be to argue that it is an experience of the product located between the catalytic and the terminal dimensions of quality, and that those dimensions are in fact not quality itself, but the precursors and result of the quality engagement process. Therefore in terms of figure 9.5 (see chapter 9) the catalytic quality dimensions relate to product

attributes and cues, and pleasure is the affective result of a satisfactory consumption experience. Quality is the engagement with the product that links the two.

This can be extended in the more general model given for quality in aesthetic products (chapter 9, figure 9.6). It could be argued that the five dimensions of catalytic aesthetic quality (technical acceptability, intensity, unity/balance, complexity and distinctiveness/interest) which are abstracted from the catalytic dimensions of the specific product (essentially attributes and cues) are the point at which quality engagement occurs.

By this argument quality is therefore neither the catalytic nor the terminal dimensions but sits at the nexus of the two. Likewise the pleasure resulting from the quality engagement is the result of the entire consumption experience. However, it must be stressed that this is not how drinkers themselves perceive wine quality. For them it has defined dimensions, rather than being a process. Thus this is an etic perspective, rather than the emic perspective which informs previous discussion of the findings (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).

Critically, this research suggests that most drinkers seem to utilise multiple dimensions and sub-dimensions of wine quality. Generally pleasure appears to be a key component of the mix, with the caveat outlined in chapter 9 that the pleasure involved does not invariably have to be that of the specific drinker. Catalytic quality itself can be divided into intrinsic quality, which resides in the product itself, and extrinsic quality, which relates to factors beyond what is tasted in the glass, such as production or marketing factors. Not everyone would accept the extrinsic factors as an integral part of quality, and where they do it is usually focused on the fact that the wine is produced to a technically acceptable standard (although the focus of winemakers on the importance of grape quality is noteworthy).

There are varying methods which may be used to evaluate wine quality. Whilst appearance, smell and, for obvious reasons, taste are generally crucial, other parts of the process vary. In part that variation is based on the cognitive/sensory/affective triad. For lower involvement consumers the sensory dimension tends to be most important, resulting in a positive or negative affective response. Where the cognitive dimension becomes more important, it may operate in three different ways. Evaluation may be the response to a benchmark, an ideal form

of what a wine style should be like (an approach which has a close relationship to paradigmatic quality dimensions). Alternatively it may be examined with the use of a checklist, an *aide-memoire* which allows an assessment of the wine against a number of the gustatory and other dimensions of quality, to see how it performs on a range of factors. For some, perhaps most, high-involvement drinkers both of these methods may be used.

### ***1.2.5 The impact of wine quality***

Once wine has been evaluated it may be relevant to discuss it and explain that evaluation <sup>1</sup>. However, this is not an easy process, as noted by various commentators on the subject (Brochet, 2001; Lehrer, 1974; Solomon, 1990). The interpretation of the differing terms used in the assessment of quality (especially the gustatory sub-dimensions) seems to vary between individuals. As the debate about ‘concentration’ suggested (chapter 8, section 1.2) those difficulties are not confined to lower involvement drinkers. In particular, however, language use appears to divorce lower involvement from higher involvement drinkers. Finally, it can be noted, communicating about quality can be difficult, even logically impossible, if at least one party to the dialogue believes that quality itself resides solely in personal taste and has no basis in objective reality. Nevertheless, whilst consumers give the impression of being ambivalent at best about understanding professionals who discuss quality, the professionals tend to be more confident that they can understand (and therefore communicate with) consumers.

Specifically in regard to professionals, especially wine producers, one can note a level of ambivalence in how they approach quality. They are working with a product they love and are required to produce ‘high quality’ wine for their consumers. Nevertheless, not all the wines they make are ones which they would chose to drink, or to which they would award high marks if they tasted blind.

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<sup>1</sup> Language is dealt with here as an issue subsequent to evaluation because in general discussing wine, as an activity, follows on from tasting. However, it is clear that language also informs evaluation, and shapes how it takes place. This is a point understood both by psychologists (Solomon, 1997) and by those in the wine industry (Brochet, 1999). Nevertheless further consideration of this is a substantial issue of perceptual psychology, and beyond the scope of this investigation.

Paradoxically, in spite of all this diversity, disagreement and failure to communicate, there seems to be a hint that there is some commonality in the aesthetic response to wine. This hint lies in the perspective of some informants that any group of drinkers will share similar evaluative responses to wines and is also implied in the specific responses of focus group participants to the wines they tasted. Despite the influence of personal taste, with its tendency to pull individual drinkers towards an idiosyncratic judgment, this study suggests that drinkers of every level of involvement may, at times, share similar evaluative conclusions about particular wines. These are conclusions which are arrived at by different psychophysical approaches, using dissimilar processes and language which sometimes fails to connect. Nevertheless they may be conclusions on the quality of wine which could be ultimately shared by most drinkers.

## **2 Managerial implications**

Some specific ideas have resulted from this research which may be of use to managers in the wine industry. Some of these have already been noted by academics, and therefore the findings support existing advice to wine marketers. Other aspects have been explored less fully by academics, although it is possible that some have been adopted by managers as a 'gut feeling' about how to market wine.

Critical is the role of product involvement. Involvement has only rarely been used as a variable for segmentation in the wine industry (Lockshin et al., 2001). It seems probable, from this study, that involvement could be a fundamental means of segmenting customers - at least in regard to wine quality perceptions and probably for motivation generally. Further, it seems likely that involvement operates in more than a simple high/low dichotomy. There is a medium level, which may or may not show signs of being a transitional stage. Even within the low and high categories of involvement there were differences, so that some displayed attitudes to quality which could be categorised as especially low involvement and some of the highly involved consumers seemed to be so highly involved that they were the cusp of becoming professionals or quasi-professionals.

In particular with regard to medium-involvement drinkers there was a suggestion in the data that this group is most influenced by gatekeepers – specifically

wine writers. This may require further research but, if correct, suggests that where a company seeks to make use of wine writers they will gain the maximum benefit if they focus on the types of wines which medium involvement consumers are most likely to buy. In price terms that could suggest a concentration on the \$10-20 dollar range. Of course, this limited focus may not necessarily endear them to the wine journalists whom they seek to influence.

Following on from involvement it is relevant to note the psychophysical approach that different consumers will bring to the consumption and evaluation of wine. Marketing wine to low-involvement consumers could usefully focus on sensory dimensions of the product. High-involvement consumers, whilst not eschewing the sensory, seem more likely to respond especially well to cognitive stimuli. Others are likely to require a varying combination of the two approaches. However the affective approach, fixed on pleasure and enjoyment, appears to be essential for all consumers. Thus the terminal quality dimension was generally perceived to be essential to quality. Consequently the marketing of wine, which is already focused on pleasure, would lose nothing by increasing the awareness of the enjoyment which consumption can bring. That focus does, however, need to be linked to the catalytic dimensions which lead to that quality.

Appearance has an ambivalent role as a cue to quality. The suggestion was made by one focus group participant that marketing managers are pressing for ever more deeply coloured red wines. However, whilst some informants, particularly at lower involvement levels, respond positively to deep-coloured wines others may be less concerned. This is relevant as the Australian market is increasingly seeing wines made from 'new' varieties, such as nebbiolo and tempranillo, which may not naturally produce such deeply coloured wines. The perspective on depth of colour may need adjustment, and marketing managers may have to send out more carefully nuanced messages about colour in future.

Communication about wine quality is a key issue. It is clear that mutual understanding of the dialogue of wine quality is limited, at best. Wine professionals need to recognise that consumers may find it hard to understand what they say and they therefore need to spend more time listening to the language of the typical low-involvement wine drinker. Crucially language seems to be used by many low-

involvement consumers for affectively evocative results, rather than precise description. Describing a wine as being like ‘something in a Dr. Who special’ may ultimately convey more than suggesting that it is ‘herbaceous, ungrapey, methoxypyrazine-ridden, oxidative and coarse’. This is particularly important with regard to the affective element of wine quality evaluation. It has been noted by one academic commentator on wine tasting that technical terms fail to communicate a wine drinker’s affective response. Thus ‘the metaphoric, emotive illusions typically used to describe wines have their legitimate place, despite their inherent imprecision’ (Jackson, 2002 p. 194). Such ‘imprecision’ may be hard for technically trained wine tasters to acknowledge, but its importance to the majority of drinkers must be acknowledged. In any event, even professionals seem unable to use terms about wine in precisely the same way, making communication even more fraught.

In this regard it is worth noting that the public debate has been dominated in the past by wine experts (Lockshin, 2002a). The language of textbooks on tasting focuses on terms like balance, concentration and complexity – and these terms have often been mirrored in wine industry publicity. The findings of this study indicate that most consumers (though not necessarily those who read tasting handbooks) are more likely to understand terms like good flavour, smoothness, and drinkability. It is also worth recalling the suggestion that some consumers use one framework for the analysis of wine quality themselves (focusing on intrinsic dimensions) but apply another framework (focusing on extrinsic dimensions) when interpreting comments made by professionals about quality.

Finally the point can be made that quality *per se* is difficult to market. The confused nature of perceived quality, in terms of conceptualisation, dimensions and approach, has been repeatedly established. This means it is very hard for a marketer to make a connection with a consumer who has a completely different perspective on the topic. How does one convey a sense of quality to someone who is firmly subjectivist, and believes quality lies only in what they taste and enjoy? How is it possible to communicate that a particular wine’s quality lies in the reflection of its year or origin if the consumer’s perspective on quality dimensions focuses on smoothness and drinkability? This problem is reduced if one is targeting different involvement levels. However even in this instance, where consumers share a

common involvement level, the findings of the study suggest they may have very different conceptual understandings of what quality is.

### **3 Further research**

This was an exploratory study. As a result all conclusions are tentative, including the many minor suggestions resulting from the analysis the data in the chapters on the findings. Any of these could repay further research. However, some key areas, especially those which may have a relevance to aesthetic products generally, would especially reward further investigation.

A model of the process of engaging with wine quality was suggested in chapter 9, and that model was tentatively extended to aesthetic products generally. The model suggested a group of five catalytic aesthetic dimensions which may be common to all aesthetic products (technical acceptability, intensity, unity/balance, complexity and distinctiveness). An examination of these in the context of other products (especially some forms of 'high art') could be illuminating, either to modify and refine the suggested model or to refute it.

By extension a greater understanding of the conceptualisation of quality in aesthetic products, and specifically the objective/subjective dichotomy and the role of preference, could also be useful. Whilst the importance of preference against an 'objective' measurement of quality has been hinted at in the academic literature (Monroe & Krishnan, 1985; Oliver, 1997; Olshavsky, 1985), intuitively one can suggest that it may be an element in all forms of aesthetic consumption.

Connected to this issue is the concept of personal taste as a correlate of quality engagement in aesthetic consumption. The importance of personal taste as a correlate seems to flow from this research, and some cautious suggestions about how personal taste is constituted have been made, but the topic warrants further examination. It is worth noting that personal taste has been alluded to in disciplines other than consumer behaviour. Thus further an integration of how it is viewed by academics in leisure (for instance Tomlinson, 1990), the sociology of taste (Grunow, 1997) and of fashion (especially Blumer, 1969) and psychology (Berlyne, 1971)

would be instructive. Also of use would be some further, more experimental, research focusing on how personal taste is constructed and interpreted.

Another idea which has been hinted at is the possible ‘consensus of taste’. As noted, there has been some literature to support the hesitant suggestions of this study about this concept (Holbrook, 1999b; Solomon et al., 1984). Further examination of whether or not there is any consensus over matters of taste and, crucially, why that should be so if it exists, could be useful for those involved in the creation and marketing of aesthetic products.

Within the domain of aesthetic consumption it has been suggested by this study that involvement appears to have a close relationship with the drinker’s engagement with the aesthetic dimension of wine. Thus, it was suggested, high-involvement drinkers show a greater propensity to have a profound experience with the product. It was not determined whether or not this was a cause of their involvement level (i.e., a past experience lead to greater involvement), or a result of it (so that increasing involvement facilitated more profound engagement). It may also be that both exist together, so that experience increases involvement which in turn increases the frequency and intensity of experiences. Consideration of this issue would be helpful as a means of extending our understanding of the nature of involvement with aesthetic products.

Underpinning many of these ideas has been the suggestion that a triadic psychophysical approach (cognitive/sensory/affective) is adopted by many wine consumers. This has not been an experimental study and any conclusions about this are merely a result of observation and the interpretation of informants’ language use. It is, moreover, beyond the expertise of the researcher to utilise appropriate psychological techniques to investigate this further. Such research would, however, be a useful expansion of our understanding of how wine is evaluated and why it is drunk. Probably, by extension, such research would also aid our understanding of more general aesthetic consumption.

As noted in the limitations below this study has been geographically and culturally limited. The research would be given more generalisability by extension into other, more established, wine producing nations (particularly in western Europe) and other consuming cultures (for instance in southeast Asia).



At a more practical level, some of the managerial implications may repay further study. One is the impact of the continuum of involvement on quality perception and attitudes to wine generally (if involvement does, as this study suggests, operate on a continuum rather than dichotomously). A second would be to develop the work on the language of quality amongst various reference groups, to examine further where similarity and disparities occur. This could be especially useful if structural and lexical analyses could be applied to the discourse.

#### **4 Limitations**

The first limitation of this study is its geographically narrow range. It examines one 'new producing' Anglophone country, still, in part at least, displaying underlying Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Time and resources have not allowed a wider geographical study and extending the research would expand our understanding of how wine quality is perceived and may have some implications for the understanding of quality in aesthetic products generally.

The second potential limitation was the researcher's own detailed knowledge of the field. A background in wine (both in retail and education) allowed the researcher an immediate understanding of the views, language and concepts of many respondents – which in phenomenological terms may be of benefit. However, this may also have provided biases and assumptions which could have informed the data collection and analysis process, making the study unreliable. It was important that these potential limitations were effectively minimised to guarantee as much validity as possible – although most qualitative researchers accept that no research is entirely objective (Janesick, 1994 p. 212). The researcher attempted to make questions to informants as value neutral as possible, and to avoid expressing his own views during the process of data gathering. It was also important to approach the topic with 'new ears' and 'new eyes' (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989), seeking not to see his own perspective mirrored, but to learn the perspective of others. Effectively this was an attempt to 'bracket personal beliefs and views' (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988 p. 510). Investigator auditing, using the researcher's supervisors to monitor and evaluate both data collection and analysis, helped to minimise the danger of implicit biases and assumptions.

This study examined the perspectives, values and ideas of people who drink wine. Without any detailed examination of the background of wine drinkers, or indeed, without using quantitative methods to attempt their segmentation, it is possible that there were cultural, educational and economic factors constraining the sample being assessed. Whilst this did not affect its validity from the perspective of obtaining insights about attitudes to wine quality, it could have had an impact on broader conclusions about quality generally, and the potential transferability of the research findings.

The research studied those who drink wine at all levels of involvement. However, it did presuppose some engagement with wine as an aesthetic and experiential product. It thus did not deal with the perspectives of those who traditionally drink wine merely as a lubricant, to accompany a meal (as one might expect in southern Europe). Further it did not engage with those who drink wine only because it is a cheap, widely available form of alcohol (as may sometimes be the case in some Australian communities). Therefore even those with the lowest level of involvement in this study would be fundamentally more engaged with the product than some other wine consumers. It will also be obvious that, whilst the study dealt with perceptions of wine quality, it did not investigate the perspectives of non-drinkers nor of those who drink other alcoholic beverages but not wine.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix 1: ‘The wine spectrum’: Wine quality and chemical analysis**

The most substantial recent attempt to relate wine quality to a chemical analysis of the product has been offered by Somers (Deves, 1998; Somers, 1998; Somers, 1999). He suggests that ‘total phenolics, as the major secondary metabolites<sup>1</sup> coming from the vine, are the very essence of red wines.’ This, he suggests, can be easily quantified by a ‘UV scale of phenolic concentration measuring from 20 to 100 absorbance units (a.u). at 280 nm. Ordinary wines, from high harvest yields, invariably have UV indices less than 30 a.u.’ (Somers, 1999 p. 54) The highest quality wines, therefore, have absorbance units in the 50-80 range. Thus Somers is suggesting that by measuring the spectral density of wine colour one is also measuring the associated trace elements and flavour precursors in red wine which stem directly from the skin of the grape – and this allows for the objective, scientific, measurement of wine.

It is worth noting that Somers is trying to establish a purely scientific validity for wine quality. His approach led him to question the true quality of wines with an established reputation. He notes that ‘any conceptual claim to objective judgement must be able to deal with such matters in some sort of quantitative way’ (Somers, 1998 p. 88). This is a position that is at odds with the approach of Acree and Cotterell (1985), who note that ultimately it is the consumer who tastes and decides quality as part of an aesthetic process. Critically Somers’ approach, whilst it may have some validity for more phenolic wines, such as shiraz and cabernet sauvignon, may be less applicable to less deeply coloured varieties such as pinot noir and nebbiolo. Moreover, it offers no justification for the quality assessment of white wines (which contain fewer phenolics, and almost no anthocyanins). Somers (1998)

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<sup>1</sup> Critically anthocyanins, which provide the colour in red wine.

justifies this by suggesting that ‘this wine sector is often considered to generally lack that extra dimension of sensory appeal which is so evident in the best red wines (p. 113)’. However, such a wholesale dismissal of all white wines would probably not be accepted by consumers, and would certainly not be accepted by the great majority of wine professionals.

## **Appendix 2: Hedonic pricing**

Hedonic pricing, the regression of price against the purported quality attributes of a wine, has been applied by researchers to analyse wine 'quality' within a number of contexts. Thus it has been used within the Swedish wine market (Nerlove, 1995), amongst wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy (Combris et al., 1997; Combris, Lecocq, & Visser, 2000) and between wines from Spain in their domestic market (Angulo et al., 2000). It has also been used to investigate the reputation of wines in France (Landon & Smith, 1997; 1998).

The entire process of hedonic pricing of wine has been challenged by Unwin (1999). He observes that the economists who developed the concept concluded that 'only under conditions of pure competition is the hedonic price function of product attributes not influenced by individual producer or consumer characteristics' (Unwin, 1999 p. 96), a point noted by Steenkamp (1989) in his comments on hedonic pricing. Unwin goes on to argue that pure competition does not apply in the wine industry and consumers do not have perfect knowledge of the products available to them. He also adds that there are a number of key difficulties with the information on which these studies are based, noting that it seems that these models are driven primarily by the availability of data rather than by any rigorous attempts to identify and measure optimum attribute variables. Additionally 'there is an issue about how the interaction of the variables themselves' (1999 p. 98) which is the problem of multicollinearity. Hedonic pricing involves a mass of sensory characteristics. These in turn are derived from the opinions of tasting panels (or individual experts) which, although experienced, are fallible and need not represent the views of the consumer public at large. Unwin also notes that the researchers fail to distinguish between first time and repeat buying behaviours. Finally, the comments on 'wine quality', as made by so-called expert judges, themselves have an important influence on wine price. Quality is therefore not an independent variable influencing price. These criticisms do not invalidate all the conclusions reached by hedonic pricing researchers but they do limit their current utility in precisely defining the nature of wine quality.

Oczkowski (2001) has attempted to rebut this critique. However, three unresolved criticisms can still be levelled at the work on hedonic pricing. First,

whilst it seeks to define quality in 'attribute-price' terms, it fails to define what quality itself is, and confuses or gives varying weight to the attributes which may comprise quality. Indeed, one of the papers on hedonic pricing concluded finally that price is based on 'objective' (extrinsic) cues and quality is a response to sensory characteristics – thus separating quality from hedonic pricing entirely (Combris et al., 1997). Second, the analyses tend to be so complex that they are of little practical use to the consumer. Additionally, it assumes that product attributes are perfectly quantifiable (Steenkamp, 1989), which is a tenuous argument with an aesthetic product like wine (Garvin, 1988).

One slightly different variant of hedonic pricing operates in a similar fashion, but has used 'quality' as the dependent variable against which origin, variety, and various other factors have been regressed (Horowitz & Lockshin, 2002). In this case quality was determined to be the marks awarded to the wines by the eminent wine judge James Halliday. The process used allowed Horowitz and Lockshin to 'predict the quality of a bottle of wine' for each different grape variety. Thus region is generally important for all wines, but the Hunter Valley and Margaret River are specifically positive for semillon. Large volume wineries are positively correlated with riesling. Some of the results seem counter-intuitive, with Mudjee having a more positive association with the grape variety shiraz than the Barossa Valley. Thus, the authors conclude, 'We show that a reasonable amount of the variance in wine-quality evaluations can be explained by extrinsic factors, (Horowitz & Lockshin, 2002 p. 9). The research is interesting and useful but two related criticisms can be levelled. The first relates to the validity of using a single judge of quality as the dependent variable for the research (a problem noted by the authors). This is especially relevant in light of the research on the accuracy of wine tasters (section 3, above). A second criticism, which applies to all related work, is that quality is assumed to be best judged by experts, rather than the consumer, who will be the ultimate arbiter of the success or otherwise of a wine.



### Appendix 3: Informant details

#### Informant demographics

	Gender		Consumption pattern					Age				Origin		
	M	F	rare	mtly	wkly	most	every	18-25	26-44	45-64	>64	nsw	sa	wa
UC/WA		3					3		1	1	1			3
UC/SA	5	1			4	2			4	2			6	
UC/NSW	8	3			4	6	1		6	5		11		
<i>s/total</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>3</i>
SC/WA	1	7		4	3	1		2	3	3				8
SC/NSW	6	7	1	3	5	2	2		10	3		13		
<i>s/total</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>8</i>
BC/WA	5	6		3	3	4	1		5	5	1			11
BC/NSW	6	2	1	1	4		2	1	4	3		8		
<i>s/total</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>11</i>
<b><i>Consum.</i></b>	<b><i>31</i></b>	<b><i>29</i></b>	<b><i>2</i></b>	<b><i>11</i></b>	<b><i>23</i></b>	<b><i>15</i></b>	<b><i>9</i></b>	<b><i>3</i></b>	<b><i>33</i></b>	<b><i>22</i></b>	<b><i>2</i></b>	<b><i>32</i></b>	<b><i>6</i></b>	<b><i>22</i></b>
PR/WA	8	3			2	4	5		10	1				11
PR/SA	6	3			2	2	5	2	5	2			9	
PR/NSW		2				1	1		2			2		
<b><i>PRs</i></b>	<b><i>14</i></b>	<b><i>8</i></b>	<b><i>0</i></b>	<b><i>0</i></b>	<b><i>4</i></b>	<b><i>7</i></b>	<b><i>11</i></b>	<b><i>2</i></b>	<b><i>17</i></b>	<b><i>3</i></b>	<b><i>0</i></b>	<b><i>2</i></b>	<b><i>9</i></b>	<b><i>11</i></b>
ME/WA	5	5			3	6	1		7	3				10
ME/SA	1					1			1				1	
ME/NSW	9	3			3	3	6	2	10			12		
<b><i>MEs</i></b>	<b><i>15</i></b>	<b><i>8</i></b>	<b><i>0</i></b>	<b><i>0</i></b>	<b><i>6</i></b>	<b><i>10</i></b>	<b><i>7</i></b>	<b><i>2</i></b>	<b><i>18</i></b>	<b><i>3</i></b>	<b><i>0</i></b>	<b><i>12</i></b>	<b><i>1</i></b>	<b><i>10</i></b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>43</b>

### *Informant descriptions*

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Consumption Pattern</b>	<b>Ref. group</b>	<b>Inv. Lvl.</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Aaron	SA	Focus group	18-25	Daily	PR	6	
Adam	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Rarely	BC	1	
Alex	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	SC	3	
Alison	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Daily	SC	3	
Andrew	SA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	UC	5	
Angela	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	BC	1	
Artemis	WA	Focus group	45-64	Monthly	SC	3	Of Greek origin
Belinda	WA	Interview	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Sommelier
Bella	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	BC	2	
Ben	WA	Focus group	<64	Monthly	BC	1	
Bill	WA	Focus group	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Briony	WA	Interview	18-25	Weekly	SC	3	
Charles	NSW	Interview	26-44	Weekly	UC	5	Lawyer
Clare	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	BC	1	
Cleo	NSW	Focus group	45-64	Weekly	SC	3	
Clive	WA	Focus group	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Damian	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	BC	3	
Dan	WA	Interview	26-44	Monthly	BC	2	
Danielle	NSW	Interview	26-44	Most days	PR	6	Student winemaker
David	NSW	Interview	26-44	Weekly	BC	2	
Diana	NSW	Interview	45-64	Daily	SC	3	On a wine course
Don	NSW	Interview	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Wholesaler
Dorothy	WA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	BC	2	
Ed	NSW	Interview	18-25	Weekly	ME	5	Retail assistant
Ellie	NSW	Focus group	18-25	Monthly	BC	3	
Emily	WA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	ME	6	Retailer
Ernest	SA	Interview	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Importer

Florence	WA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	BC	1	
Frances	WA	Interview	45-64	Daily	UC	4	Married to wine journalist
Frank	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Monthly	SC	2	
Fred	NSW	Interview	45-64	Daily	BC	2	Musician
Gemma	SA	Focus group	45-64	Daily	PR	6	
George	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	BC	2	
Gerhard	NSW	Interview	45-64	Daily	UC	5	
Greg	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Retailer
Hal	SA	Focus group	18-25	Daily	PR	6	
Helena	WA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	SC	2	Of Greek origin
Henry	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Monthly	SC	2	
Hetty	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	SC	2	
Ian	NSW	Interview	45-64	Daily	BC	2	
Ingrid	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Most days	SC	2	
James	SA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	UC	4	
Jane	WA	Focus group	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Jeff	WA	Focus group	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Distributor
John	NSW	Interview	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Distributor
Julia	SA	Focus group	26-44	Most days	PR	6	
Karen	NSW	Interview	26-44	Rare	SC	3	
Kate	NSW	Interview	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Keith	WA	Interview	45-64	Most days	ME	6	Show judge
Kevin	NSW	Interview	26-44	Weekly	SC	3	Graphic artist
Larry	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	ME	6	Distributor
Laura	NSW	Interview	26-44	Most days	SC	4	
Leo	NSW	Focus group	45-64	Most days	UC	5	
Lesley	WA	Focus group	45-64	Most days	ME	6	Distributor
Louis	WA	Focus group	26-44	Monthly	SC	1	
Maria	SA	Focus group	45-64	Daily	PR	6	

Mark	WA	Interview	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Martha	NSW	Interview	26-44	Daily	ME	6	Educator
Martin	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	PR	6	
Mary	NSW	Interview	26-44	Most days	UC	4	
Mavis	WA	Interview	>64	Daily	UC	4	
Melissa	WA	Focus group	26-44	Most days	PR	6	
Mike	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	UC	4	
Morag	WA	Interview	26-44	Daily	UC	5	
Murray	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	ME	6	Brand manager
Natalya	WA	Focus group	26-44	Monthly	SC	2	Of Yugoslav origin
Neil	NSW	Interview	45-64	Monthly	BC	1	
Nell	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	SC	2	
Nettie	WA	Interview	45-64	Most days	BC	2	
Neville	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	ME	6	Retailer
Nick	WA	Interview	26-44	Most days	PR	6	
Nicolai	NSW	Interview	26-44	Weekly	SC	3	Russian migrant
Noel	WA	Focus group	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Norman	WA	Interview	45-64	Daily	BC	2	
Oliver	NSW	Focus group	45-64	Most days	UC	4	
Olivia	WA	Interview	26-44	Most days	ME	6	Sommelier
Pam	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Daily	ME	6	Brand manager
Patricia	SA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	UC	5	
Paul	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	ME	6	Brand manager
Peta	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	ME	6	Brand manager
Philip	SA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	UC	5	
Richard	SA	Interview	26-44	Weekly	PR	6	
Robert	WA	Interview	26-44	Most days	BC	3	
Roger	SA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	PR	6	
Roz	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	UC	3	

Rupert	WA	Focus group	26-44	Daily	ME	6	Journalist
Ryan	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Daily	ME	6	Distributor
Sally	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Daily	ME	6	Journalist
Sandy	SA	Focus group	26-44	Most days	PR	6	
Sean	SA	Focus group	26-44	Most days	UC	5	
Simon	NSW	Interview	26-44	Weekly	UC	5	
Siobhan	NSW	Focus group	26-44	Most days	UC	4	
Stan	WA	Interview	45-64	Most days	PR	1	Contract grapegrower
Stuart	SA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	UC	5	
Sue	WA	Focus group	45-64	Weekly	SC	3	
Tim	NSW	Interview	18-25	Daily	ME	6	Retailer
Tina	WA	Interview	18-25	Weekly	SC	3	
Tom	SA	Interview	26-44	Daily	PR	6	
Tony	NSW	Interview	45-64	Most days	UC	5	
Umberto	NSW	Interview	26-44	Daily	ME	6	Journalist
Ursula	WA	Interview	45-64	Weekly	BC	2	
Vince	WA	Focus group	26-44	Weekly	PR	6	Viticulturist
Waldemar	NSW	Interview	45-64	Weekly	SC	4	Russian migrant
Wendy	WA	Interview	26-44	Most days	PR	6	
William	NSW	Focus group	45-64	Most days	UC	4	

### *Notes to the tables*

#### *Demographics:*

WA Western Australia

SA South Australia

NSW New South Wales (predominantly Sydney)

#### *Consumption pattern*

rare Drinks wine less than once per month.

monthly Drinks wine a few times each month.

wkly Drinks wine a few times each week.

most Drinks wine most days.

every Drinks wine every day.

*Names and details*

All informants have been given pseudonyms. Where additional details about an informant have been given it has been noted in the text, as it maybe relevant to the presentation or interpretation of their comments.

## **Appendix 4: Wine selection**

Selection of the wines to be used for the focus groups required careful consideration. A number of criteria were adopted to ensure appropriate wines were used.

- The wines should be sufficiently varied to provide some interest for all target groups to guarantee that they would provoke some debate.
- The wines should be sufficiently varied to allow even the most inexperienced tasters to see distinctions.
- The styles of wines should be readily available outside Australia to allow precise replication of the methodology overseas in due course.
- The wines should reflect a range of price levels and therefore cover a range of purported quality levels.

One area for key consideration was the stylistic relationship of the wines to each other. For instance, all of the wines could be made from the same grape variety (say chardonnay) but with a different purported quality level (and therefore probably each having a different price). This would provide a very clear comparative exercise for the participants. On the other hand the four wines could be widely differing in style (for instance, a sparkling wine, a sweet wine, an aged white wine, and a young red wine). This would allow a much better assessment of the participants' views on the discrete evaluation of wine (for each would of necessity be treated in isolation), but would make it harder to probe their views on the comparative nature of quality. As a result it was decided to opt for two wines which could reasonably be viewed as a pair (in this case two sparkling wines) and two wines which bore no stylistic similarity to the any of the others, to allow for discrete consideration. Thus the wines selected were:

- 1 A champagne (retail price around \$55).
- 2 A moderately cheap Australian sparkling wine (retail price around \$10).

The rationale behind these two wines was that sparkling wines are generally considered difficult to evaluate, even by wine professionals, because the distinctions between them are quite fine. It was hoped that this would encourage all participants to think carefully about the relative quality of the wines. At the same time, whilst both were sparkling white wines made by the same method, there was sufficient difference in them for even the most diffident novice taster to detect. As a secondary consideration the champagne would probably be popular with most of the professional participants and make them feel they were having the opportunity to taste at least one very enjoyable wine as part of the process (and this proved to be the case). In part it thus rewarded them for their attendance.

- 3        An aged (seven year old) New Zealand sauvignon blanc (not available at retail).

Whilst sauvignon blanc may reasonably be considered to be one of the world's 'classic' grape varieties, some drinkers have an ambivalent attitude to its ability to age for more than a couple of years from its harvest (Robinson, 1986). However, in terms of the wine's structure (particularly its high acid level) there is no reason why it should not age well. This wine was specifically selected to challenge some of the attitudes towards quality among the more experienced tasters. (The age on this wine makes it hard to price it precisely, but the latest vintage retails for about \$16-17). This selection proved to be the most controversial of the wines, with a few participants in each focus group being intrigued by it, even liking it, but with most (particularly in the professional focus groups) commenting very unfavourably about it.

- 4        A New Zealand pinot noir (Retail price around \$35).

This was selected as a well-known wine from a reputable producer (and therefore it could be perceived to be of high 'quality'), yet pinot noir is a less trendy red grape variety in Australia (at least in comparison to cabernet sauvignon and shiraz). The wine could therefore provoke an instinctively antagonistic response in some participants who prefer a more 'full-bodied' style of wine. This instinctive response could provoke useful debate within the group about its overall quality.



Although two wines selected were from New Zealand, that country's wines are readily available in Australia. It was felt that the style of wine, and the function they may perform within the overall selection, was more important than their provenance.

The wines were presented in the order given here (champagne, Australian sparkling wine, sauvignon blanc and pinot noir.) This order was selected for two reasons. First, in professional tastings there is a tendency (though it is not absolute) to move from sparkling to white to red wines. Second, the champagne preceded the cheaper sparkling wine to avoid the more experienced tasters assuming that the wines went in a simple order of progression, from the cheapest to the most expensive. The order of presentation was not varied between groups for two reasons. First, to preclude any possible variation in hedonic response merely because of the varying progression. Second, there was a concern about the halo effect, whereby the proximity of one wine to another colours judgments about it (Jackson, 2002). It was felt better to limit the impact of the halo effect by ensuring that if it did occur it was always relevant to the same wines. Wines were served at a temperature which would be normally appropriate for the style of wine. The wines were masked (the still wines in unlabelled bottles) but passed to participants to pour for themselves.

It would be reasonable to say that experts would consider wines 1 and 4 to be of high to very high quality, wine 2 of mediocre quality at best, and wine 3 to be too old, and possibly defective, though not necessarily undrinkable.

## Appendix 5: Focus group and individual interview guides

### *For the Producer Focus Group*

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why do you drink wine?</li> <li>2. What do members of the group aim for in the wine that they produce?</li> <li>3. What do members of the group consider that wine quality is?</li> <li>4. How do members of the group evaluate wine quality when they taste it?</li> <li>5. What do members of the group consider the relationship of the appearance of the wine to judgements they may make about its quality.</li> </ol>	<p><i>Invite an opening statement from each. (it helps deter 'groupthink')</i></p> <p><i>Does it relate to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> <li>- Terroir</li> <li>- Origin</li> <li>- Packaging</li> </ul> <p><i>Or is it intrinsic in the wine itself?</i></p> <p><i>How do those evaluative markers relate to hedonic consumption?</i></p> <p><i>Is there a difference between tasting and drinking – and how we evaluate wines?</i></p> <p><i>Is 'distinctiveness' a factor in higher quality wines?</i></p> <p><i>What is the relationship of personal preference to quality evaluation?</i></p> <p><i>Describe any differences in quality evaluations between the "clinical" environment of the focus tastings and when drinking in other environments.</i></p> <p><i>Is it harder or easier to analyse sparkling wines?</i></p>
<p><b><i>The wines are then tasted.</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Select the wine you like best – and explain what it does for you.</li> <li>7. Members of the group will be asked to explain which wines they think are of higher quality, and why.</li> <li>8. The process of the assessment of wine quality as a discrete or comparative process will be explored with the group.</li> <li>9. Is there any similarity between the appreciation of wine and – say – the appreciation of music?</li> <li>10. Members of the group will be invited to discuss the importance of taste as opposed to the other reasons for drinking wine.</li> </ol>	<p><i>Is it easier to assess the 'pair', or the separate wines?</i></p>

### ***For the Mediator Focus Groups***

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why do you drink wine?</li> <li>2. What do members of the group consider when making choices about marketing, judging, writing about or promoting wine?</li> <li>3. What do members of the group consider that wine quality is?</li> <li>4. How do members of the group evaluate wine quality when they taste it?</li> <li>5. What do members of the group consider the relationship of the appearance of the wine to judgements they may make about its quality?</li> </ol>	<p><i>Invite an opening statement from each. (it helps deter 'groupthink')</i></p> <p><i>Does it relate to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> <li>- Terroir</li> <li>- Origin</li> <li>- Packaging</li> </ul> <p><i>Or is it intrinsic in the wine itself?</i></p> <p><i>How do those evaluative markers relate to hedonic consumption?</i></p> <p><i>Is there a difference between tasting and drinking – and how we evaluate wines?</i></p>
<p><b><i>The wines are then tasted.</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Select the wine you like best – and explain what it does for you.</li> <li>7. Members of the group will be asked to explain which wines they think are of higher quality, and why.</li> <li>8. The process of the assessment of wine quality as a discrete or comparative process will be explored with the group.</li> <li>9. Is there any similarity between the appreciation of wine and – say – the appreciation of music?</li> <li>10. Members of the group will be invited to discuss the importance of taste as opposed to the other reasons for drinking wine.</li> </ol>	<p><i>Is 'distinctiveness' a factor in higher quality wines?</i></p> <p><i>What is the relationship of personal preference to quality evaluation?</i></p> <p><i>Describe any differences in quality evaluations between the "clinical" environment of the focus tastings and when drinking in other environments.</i></p> <p><i>Is it harder or easier to analyse sparkling wines?</i></p> <p><i>Is it easier to assess the 'pair', or the separate wines?</i></p>

### ***For the Consumer Focus Groups***

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why do you drink wine?</li> <li>2. What do members of the group consider when making choices about drinking wine?</li> <li>3. What do members of the group consider that wine quality is?</li> <li>4. How do members of the group evaluate wine quality when they taste it?</li> <li>5. What do members of the group consider the relationship of the appearance of the wine to judgements they may make about its quality?</li> </ol> <p><b><i>The wines are then tasted.</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Select the wine you like best – and explain what it does for you.</li> <li>7. Members of the group will be asked to explain which wines they think are of higher quality, and why.</li> <li>8. The process of the assessment of wine quality as a discrete or comparative process will be explored with the group.</li> <li>9. Is there any similarity between the appreciation of wine and – say – the appreciation of music?</li> <li>10. Members of the group will be invited to discuss the importance of taste as opposed to the other reasons for drinking wine</li> </ol>	<p><i>Invite an opening statement from each. (it helps deter 'groupthink')</i></p> <p><i>Does it relate to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> <li>- Origin</li> <li>- Packaging</li> </ul> <p><i>Or is it intrinsic in the wine itself?</i></p> <p><i>Do those evaluative markers relate to pleasure or thought processes?</i></p> <p><i>If 'the taste' is key to quality – what do they look for in taste?</i></p> <p><i>Is 'distinctiveness' a factor in higher quality wines – or is familiarity crucial?</i></p> <p><i>What is the relationship of personal preference to quality evaluation?</i></p> <p><i>Describe any differences in quality evaluations between the "clinical" environment of the focus tastings and when drinking in other environments.</i></p> <p><i>Is it harder or easier to analyse sparkling wines?</i></p> <p><i>Is it easier to assess the 'pair', or the separate wines?</i></p>
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### ***For the Producer Interviews***

1. Why does the informant drink wine?
2. The informant's goals in the wines that they produce.
3. The informant's views about the nature of wine quality.
4. The informant's processes for evaluating wine quality.
5. The informant's views on the relationship of the appearance of the wine to judgments they may make about its quality.
6. The informant's views about the relationship of quality to external factors, such as the situation in which you drink it.
7. The informant's views about the relationship of quality related to other external things, like the price, label, brand, or where it comes from – specifically terroir.
8. The informant's opinions on the discrete versus the comparative evaluation of wine quality.
9. Whether or not there is a similarity in the consumption and quality evaluation of wine and – say – that of music.
10. The relationship of personal preference to quality evaluation.
11. The informant's views on the importance of taste as opposed to the other reasons for drinking wine (like its alcohol content).
12. How far the informants think they can understand consumer dialogue about the quality of wines.
13. The informant's views about the relative importance of the vineyard and the wine maker in producing wine quality?
14. What implications the informant's view about wine quality have for the production of wine.

### **Options:**

1. The ease/difficulty of evaluating sparkling wine
2. The importance of distinctiveness.

### ***For the Mediator Interviews***

1. Why does the informant drink wine?
2. The informant's approach to the marketing or promotion of wine.
3. The informant's views about the nature of wine quality.
4. The informant's processes for evaluating wine quality.
5. The informant's views on the relationship of the appearance of the wine to judgements they may make about its quality.
6. The informant's views about the relationship of quality to external factors, such as the situation in which you drink it.
7. The informant's views about the relationship of quality related to other external things, like the price, label, brand, or where it comes from.
8. The informant's opinions on the discrete versus the comparative evaluation of wine quality.
9. Whether or not there is a similarity in the consumption and quality evaluation of wine and – say – that of music.
10. The relationship of personal preference to quality evaluation
11. The informant's views on the importance of taste as opposed to the other reasons for drinking wine (like its alcohol content).
12. How far the informants think they can understand consumer dialogue about the quality of wines.
13. The informant's views about the relative importance of the wine producer versus the role of the marketer and promoter in establishing wine quality?
14. What implications the informant's view about wine quality have for the promotion and marketing of wine.

### **Options:**

1. The ease/difficulty of evaluating sparkling wine
2. The importance of distinctiveness.

### ***For the Consuming Public Interviews***

1. Why does the informant drink wine?
2. The informant's reasons for drinking the wines that they choose.
3. The informant's views about the nature of wine quality.
4. The informant's processes for evaluating wine quality.
5. The informant's views on the relationship of the appearance of the wine to judgements they may make about its quality.
6. The informant's views about the relationship of quality to external factors, such as the situation in which you drink it.
7. The informant's views about the relationship of quality related to other external things, like the price, label, brand, or where it comes from.
8. The informant's opinions on the discrete versus the comparative evaluation of wine quality.
9. The informant's opinions on comparing preference and quality.
10. Whether or not there is a similarity in the consumption and quality evaluation of wine and – say – that of music.
11. The informant's views on the importance of taste as opposed to the other reasons for drinking wine (like its alcohol content).
12. How far the informants think they can understand producer and marketing dialogue about the quality of wines.
13. What implications the informant's view about wine quality have for their selection of wine.

### **Options:**

1. The ease/difficulty of evaluating sparkling wine
2. The importance of distinctiveness.

## Appendix 6: The importance of quality in wine

Although drinkers were asked about the importance of wine quality, there was a comparative paucity of data elicited, especially when compared with responses on the nature and assessment of wine. It may well have been that the clinical enquiry about the relevance of quality was not only hard to grapple with, but also failed to enthuse informants. Compare the two following comments. Kevin was asked first about his views concerning the nature of quality:

Kevin (SC, medium-involvement): I enjoy the sensation after a second glass. (Laughs). I enjoy just the flavour ... [When] I do get a good one, I save the good ones to go with a particular meal ... If it's a really good red, pinots and things like that, they are just more intense than the other wines ... As far as a good wine, how would I distinguish it? Just a subtleness, and a sharpness, and my own taste really.

Kevin is clear about what he enjoys about wine – about his engagement with its quality so that a sense of enthusiasm about it comes through. He likes flavour, he enjoys a ‘subtleness and sharpness’. He is passionate about it – passionate enough to save good wines for special meals. Some time later he was asked to comment on the relevance of quality to his personal choice in wine:

Kevin: Not a lot - I still probably stay within my price range. Just because I think its overkill to spend \$30 on a bottle when I get a great one for \$16.

This response was very matter-of-fact. Quality has less impact on his wine selection, than price and perceived value. This is despite the fact that he spoke with excitement when discussing the idea of quality and commented on some of the dimensions of quality, such as flavour. There seemed to be a split between his (affective) enthusiasm for good wine, and his (cognitive) analysis of how unimportant quality was in his selection. As a result some of the information elicited about the importance of quality to informants came from interpreting the answers to other questions, rather than merely relying on responses to explicit probing.

It is possible that such a distinction (observed with other informants) may have an impact on the apparent importance of quality. It is essential in what follows to distinguish the straightforward, often dispassionate answers given by informants who were questioned about the relevance of quality from the enthusiasm (and often



loquacity) which they displayed elsewhere. When the topic was discussed by them it covered two key issues. The first was the impact of quality on the selection of wine, the second was communication about wine. Additionally professionals had a distinct perspective on the relevance of quality which needs consideration.

## **1      Quality and the consumer**

Informants were regularly asked about, and occasionally referred voluntarily to, the importance of quality, particularly within the context of their decision making about consumption. This was often perceived to be conceptually hard to grapple with:

Briony (SC, medium-involvement): Probably [quality is] not ... a very good way to choose wine. I guess it would be for me - because that's what I'm concerned with. But ... if I [ask] someone in a bottle shop, 'can you help me pick a high quality wine?' They usually [reply] anyway - 'what are you looking for? Are you looking for a dry wine, a sweet wine?' Certainly I would say to them 'not too sweet not too dry'. And then, no, I probably wouldn't look at the colour that much ... The bottle, 'oh ok it's great'. But I'd say taste is the main factor for choosing wine.

As a factor in Briony's wine selection process, quality was first 'not a very good way to choose', then she decided that it was important for her, but not for others, before that idea was superseded by style and packaging. Finally taste was seen to be the main factor. Taste is itself, as we have seen, a dimension of quality and Briony was one of those who when asked immediately defined wine quality as taste. The importance of quality to Briony's purchase decision was hard for her to pin down.

### ***1.1      The purchase decision***

With many medium- and high-involvement consumers a repeated response to the issue of quality and selection was that quality is important to them:

Morag (UC, high-involvement): I imagine it's got everything to do with what I select.

Morag's instant response, noting the importance of quality, was regularly repeated (by professionals, as well as consumers). However, having made her statement Morag paused for some time and then continued:

Morag: Every kind of price point for every occasion.

Quality is important, but in trying to define this importance Morag switched to the symbolic role of price (chapter 8 section 3.4.4). This was a regular switch made by many informants who perhaps sensed that quality should be important in their choice of wine, but who struggled with its abstract nature and used price semiotically, indexing quality without delineating it.

Price was not invariably seen as a quality cue - and even when it was its relationship to quality was not perceived to be linear. However, when wine was purchased price almost inevitably had an essential role (as discussed in chapter 8, section 3.4). This seemed to operate even for informants who otherwise played down price as a cue:

Charles (UC, high-involvement): I think [quality is] the prime motivation when I'm buying wine. I'm never going to buy a wine - particularly an expensive wine ... because other people say it's good wine if I personally don't think it's good quality relative to its price.

later

Charles: Frankly no wine [is worth too much]. The DRC [for instance]. I appreciate that it's market economics - supply and demand - I appreciate that, but nothing is worth that much. It's not a house I can live in, it's consumed after a couple of hours. So I'm not going to spend \$500 or \$600 on a wine ... not at the moment because my income can't afford it - when I'm a partner I might ... even then it's an awful lot of money.

Quality is the major determinant of what Charles will drink, but there is an upper price limit. He is a fairly wealthy solicitor, and will buy ultra-premium wine, but believes quality has a financial ceiling – above that ceiling supply and demand, rather than quality, determine price. He discussed wines from the Domaine de la Romanee Conti (DRC) vineyard in Burgundy, and whilst he appreciated their quality and the fact that scarcity gives them value, he still could not accept that they are worth the price the market determines for them. For him quality does not operate discretely for selection, but in a symbiotic relationship with price and value. This is distinct from the way that, for many informants, quality often seemed to operate when divorced from the context of selection. In that situation quality seemed to operate more discretely from price and value, functioning just as an evaluative process.

Other informants put limits on the importance of quality in selection. Thus:

SJC: What implications does your view about quality have for your selection of wine?

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): I think ... it is a personal thing. You know I'm going away from ... oak ... And it might be a good high quality wine out there, in the general consensus, but for me I wouldn't buy it because it does have the oak.

Wine selection is informed by quality, but for Laura her personal distaste for oak overrides that, even if a potential wine choice is commonly regarded as high quality. This relates to the issue of the importance of preference over quality in certain instances (as discussed in chapter 7, section 2.2.1).

## **1.2 Repeat purchase**

It was in the context of repeat purchase that quality *per se* became most significant and more important than most quality cues (price being the key exception). Repeat purchase seemed to be a key issue for many informants. Quality is experienced and therefore gives confidence. In this way quality acts negatively as a risk reduction factor and also positively as something to be sought out for its own sake. Thus:

SJC: What implications do you think your views about wine quality have for your selection of wine?

Waldemar (SC, medium-involvement, Russian migrant): ...I probably look in the first place for the wines that I know, that I drink. And then I'm trying to look at the price. I'll use [as an example] Metala. Because it's - in my reasoning - probably the best value for money for wine in Australia, or one of the best. And we drink it a lot. We probably consume four cases a year of this wine ... Same story with d'Arenberg. I really like d'Arenberg. I think they're [a] very good quality winery. And ... they're not too big. Simultaneously, at least, they produce enough wine to world-consistent quality. And in particular I drink a lot of their traditional shiraz which, in my view, you can call it a middle of the road but it's a very soft wine.

Waldemar relates his view of quality to value – but critically quality leads to regular purchases of the same wines. Price forms the parameters to purchase at this point but quality offers security.

## 2 Communicating quality

Informants were regularly probed to see whether or not they understood what others meant when they discussed quality. In the case of consumers they were asked if they comprehended what professionals were talking about when they claimed that a wine was of good quality. A variety of responses was elicited.

### 2.1 *The consumer perspective*

**Scepticism:** A regular response to the enquiry about dialogue comprehension was scepticism. The following comes from a group interview of BCs:

Ian (low-involvement): Salesmanship - they don't know what the hell they're talking about.

Neil (low-involvement): I'd say they do know for themselves. To pass it on to you ... because they're trying to sell you something.

Ian was merely cynical – people promoting wine do not actually know what they are talking about. Neil was marginally less cynical, for he believes these people understand what they think quality is. He remains sceptical, though, when they try to convey that idea of quality to him. He seems to be suggesting that marketers' understanding is warped by the need to sell wine. This perspective was widespread, and not merely held by low-involvement consumers:

Simon (UC, high-involvement): Oh, when you see it on a label - when you see quality written down as a word - no I don't [understand]. I mean if a commentator were writing about it I'd be very wary ... It's like political promises. So I think when someone else says this is a quality wine you have to taste it yourself to see.

Simon would be cautious of what a commentator, perhaps a wine journalist, might write, but his opening comment about wine labels suggests he is mainly concerned about marketers and his damning comment about political promises seems aimed primarily at them. But whoever it is who says a wine has quality, for Simon the only answer is to taste it for himself.

Others follow a similar line, but distinguish between the marketing puff and the knowledge of a producer:

Gerhard (UC, high-involvement): Depends whether it's marketers or whether it's the winemaker. Marketers will use whatever means they can think of to sell the product and I don't trust them. Most

winemakers are proud enough to tell you which vintage is good and which one is maybe not so good. They won't run their own wine down - but they will not say 'this is the best vintage ever' if it's wrong.

Gerhard accepted that winemakers are generally straight about their wine; they are – perhaps – too intimately involved with its creation to be able to create illusions about it. Maybe, he would claim, because marketers have less direct connection with shaping the wine they are more prepared to do whatever it takes to promote it.

**Jargon:** One comment – made even by those who thought that they do understand the dialogue of wine quality – was that it can be too shrouded in jargon. Thus one informant, when asked if he understood what was said by those who were trying to sell him wine, responded cautiously:

Waldemar (SC, medium-involvement, Russian migrant): I think I do. I suspect that - and maybe I'm too cynical - but I suspect that in many cases people do not understand what they are saying. They [are] just repeating what they got from people who understand ... and it is about how freely their tongue moves, how smooth talkers they are ... For me this is [the] criteria – [the] less jargon [the] more people understand. In wine a lot of people just hide behind this jargon.

Waldemar has already expressed some interest in wine. He claimed that he reads about it and he enjoys visiting wineries. His conclusion, as a result of this, is that what is said is often learnt by rote, without being fully understood. As a result he considers that professionals may hide behind the jargon. In contrast he later praised one particular cellar-door manager who made an effort to be clear and jargon-free when talking with visitors. This perspective, condemning jargon, tended to be held by low- and medium-involvement consumers.

**Production processes:** Whilst scepticism and a dislike of jargon characterised consumers' concern about the dialogue surrounding wine, some informants claimed that they did, at least in part, understand professionals when they talked about wine quality. In this case quality regularly became related to production processes rather than to anything organoleptically inherent in the wine. Prior to the following extract David had been asked if he understands professionals who talk about wine quality:

David (BC, low-involvement): To some extent I do. I've done a few winery tours - and I appreciate what they're trying to explain to me ...

What's gone into making that wine. What ... the quality of it [is]. But at the same time I can't appreciate why one wine is going to taste better than another if the process is going to be the same ... If they said it was smooth, it had complexity and balance - well that doesn't mean anything to me. If they said they'd aged it in oak, and it came from this crop, and it was a great crop that year - then I'd say 'Ok there's more quality involved.'

David has already been noted as claiming that wine quality only inheres in the production processes used, not otherwise in what one tastes. He was consistent in applying this to the dialogue of quality. He could not see how a wine has higher quality merely because of taste, and he did not accept the organoleptic dimensions of quality. But low yields or good weather for ripening and vintage are factors which can make the dialogue of quality valid for him. This tended to be a perspective of low- and medium-involvement consumers. Laura has previously been quoted analysing quality as smoothness, structure and balance:

Laura (SC, medium-involvement) [There was] that whole fever that hit with that '98 Coonawarra thing. You know, they said conditions were favourable. So I imagined that the weather was right and there was the right amount of ripening and all the timing happened ... right on cue. How that actually correlates to a perfect wine is ... not as clear. But the conditions are right so [quality is] out there somewhere ... But how that works through into a perfect wine is not so clear.

Laura refers to the publicity which surrounded the 1998 vintage in South Australia generally, and Coonawarra in particular, which hyped it as one of the best vintages for many years. What made the wine good, she suggests, may have been the weather and the timing of the harvest so that her interpretation of the professional perspective on those wines is that quality equates to production. She is, indeed, uncertain about how the professionals' view of quality will relate to her search for balance and smoothness.

There consequently seems to be a split between consumers' evaluations of quality dimensions (pleasure, taste, smoothness etc). and the their understanding of the dialogue about quality – which fixes on production issues. Thus when consumers were asked to consider the quality of a wine which they tasted they tended to use one set of criteria. However, if they hear a wine professional talking about the quality of the wine the consumer engages an entirely different set of criteria, which may have no perceived link to the quality they evaluate organoleptically. This may reflect an uncertainty in their own judgments. It may also imply that they consider that experts

use different, perhaps more ‘objective’, production-related criteria in making their quality judgments.

## 2.2 *The professional outlook on dialogue*

In general wine professionals tended to think that they could understand consumers’ dialogue about quality:

SJC: When consumers talk about quality in wine, do you think you understand what they mean?

Mark (winemaker): Yeah, I do actually.

Mark is a successful winemaker with a large company. He was confident that he could interpret what the consumer says about how good a wine is and use that to deliver the quality his customers’ desire. His confident perspective on understanding the dialogue of quality was also shared by a number of mediators:

Keith (show-judge): Balance is critical for consumers – and the wine must have flavour for them.

Ernest (importer): Generally I do feel I can understand what they're getting at ... I don't feel like they're talking a completely different language that I don't understand.

Keith was clear that balance is the pre-eminent quality dimension for the consumer (a view which a few other professionals supported). The implication is that when the consumer showed approbation or disapprobation he understood precisely why. Ernest was explicit that he and the consumers of his wine are not talking a ‘different language’. The wines that Ernest imports tend to be quite expensive, probably generally sold to highly involved UCs. It may well be the case that their interest and knowledge allows both parties in a discussion to interpret what the other says with some degree of accuracy.

Often, however, when probed on this issue, professionals shifted the issue away from a strict focus on the consumer’s perspective on quality. Answers regularly seemed to suggest that professionals saw dialogue about quality as a process which allowed them to understand a purchase decision.

SJC: How much do you think you understand what consumers mean when they talk about high quality?

...

Don (distribution manager): I've been fortunate enough to have done some research into what makes a consumer purchase a product. So I make an assumption and say that a lot to do with that purchase decision is a perceived quality. And so I sort of understand. I feel that I have a fair understanding of what a consumer is looking for. I think we can look at what is successful in the market place as a pointer to ... what the consumer may want. And I guess, if I sit down and think about it critically, what the consumer perceives as quality will be the successful brands in the marketplace. And Rosemount springs to mind, a very, very user-friendly style in the commercially priced ranges.

Don interpreted consumers' conceptions of quality as being intimately related to the wine they will buy, and related it closely to successful brands – using Rosemount wines as an example. Like Don a number of professionals, especially those in marketing, saw quality primarily as an issue of decision, rather than engagement with or evaluation of the product. This reflects their focus on selling and promoting the consumption of wines.

Some professionals were a little more cautious about their ability to understand the consumer:

John (distribution manager): I have to say that I think I have a good idea. I wouldn't like to say 'yes, I know'.

[later]

John: I think the one thing that is difficult is for someone in the wine trade to perceive what the punter ... thinks. And I think ... our opinion gets slightly distorted, because of us being in the field. And I think that one of the things that is really quite interesting to note is that we over complicate things. And the people we are selling it to ... look at wine in a more simple context. And what we think [that] probably is quality - and good and right and fantastic - may not be quite what they think. I think we know - but I'm not sure one hundred percent.

John was hesitant – initially suggesting that he may understand what the consumer conceives quality to be. Returning to the issue a few minutes later he was not so sure. Rather, the perspective of working all the time with wine ('being in the field') means that professionals see wine as being more complex – perhaps investing it with more importance – than the consumer. That inevitably clouds perspectives on what quality is and this ambiguity undermines his absolute certainty of knowledge. Fewer professionals took this hesitant approach and more tended to think that they understood the consumer well.



### **3 The professional perspective on the relevance of wine quality**

Whereas the consumers interviewed merely seemed to approach quality as an issue relating to what they will drink, professionals inevitably tended to have a more complex viewpoint. They almost invariably loved to drink wine, and had very carefully formulated preferences – but they also make their living by ensuring that consumers will buy the wine they make, promote or sell. Additionally they appeared to get bound up in issues of precisely where quality originates: the vineyard, the winery or in marketing.

#### **3.1 *Winemakers***

The fact that there is a level of ambivalence by winemakers towards their profession has been alluded to throughout the results of this study. They may feel torn between their love for specific styles of wine and their need to produce wines which the consumer will buy. This ambivalence also seemed to inform their perspective on the relevance of wine quality. The following two informants give one view on the topic:

Maria (winemaker): I think winemakers make the wine for themselves.

[later]

Maria: I say wine should seduce you. In lots of cases [the consumer will] drink quite low flavour wines because they're inoffensive.

Danielle (winemaking student): I think my views [on quality] are very strong. And I don't think that most people will like my wine. I think that people that are real lovers of wine will - but I'm not sure ... I don't think I'll be into the 'want to be famous,' no I'm not interested in that. I just want to make a quality wine and I don't care ... if Joe Bloggs down the road didn't like my wine. Or I didn't win gold medals or anything like that. I wouldn't care as long as I was superbly happy with it.

Maria is a highly regarded and established winemaker, with a great deal of autonomy, making wine at a 'high-quality' small to medium-sized winery. She claimed first to be making wine primarily for herself and then defined quality by suggesting that a wine should seduce. She was almost dismissive of most drinkers, who care little for the intensity of flavour in what they drink. Quality, primarily, informs what she wants to create irrespective of the consumer. One could argue that

the commercial success of her wines belies this, although they are all priced in the ultra-premium range upwards and therefore are not necessarily drunk by the general consumer. Danielle is an oenology student. She has a vision of the wines she would like to make. They may be idiosyncratic, but would be of high quality to her. She is indifferent to public appreciation of what she may create. She can afford this indifference as she does not yet have to make her living by selling the wines that she makes.

There is a contrasting perspective:

SJC: What implications do you think your views about quality have for the way that you make wine?

Kate: I guess I'm always trying to make a balanced wine. I remember last year having various discussions with a graduate wine maker, who was working with me, who was a bit obsessed with tannin. As ... [we make] [Volume Brand X] and [Volume Brand Y] - they're not renowned for their big chunky tannins. You know - it doesn't have a place. So you have to keep what you're making in line.

Kate is responsible for making large volume branded wines. Her qualitative aim (echoed by other winemakers) is for balance. Her brands are soft, easy-drinking wines. That balance, which must be 'kept in line' to ensure consumer acceptability, is Kate's focus. Kate works for a large company, where the emphasis will be on fast turn-around and guaranteeing consistency from year to year to protect sales. She cannot afford the luxury of making wines of the style that she would choose to drink.

### **3.2 Mediators**

There was, for some mediators, a similar ambivalence about the relationship of quality to the personal and the professional existence. Generally, however, they seemed to handle it with more equanimity. Prior to the following extract Don has already talked of two kinds of quality, the marketing-related concept which links quality to saleability, and his own personal judgment:

Don (distributor): We are heavily focused on the commercial end of the market. So it's important for me to keep my ... cellar power out of the way. And it's important to look at the broader range of aspects we talked about earlier when we were talking about professionalism ... That is going to be the determiner of success. Whether I enjoy the wine or not is going to have very little bearing on whether that wine's successful.

Don's professionalism allows him to split his work from what he drinks at home. Although tasting is an important part of his job, he has to bracket off what he calls his 'cellar power', which allows him to judge and savour high quality wine, in order to ensure the commercial success of his employers, who focus on high-volume, low-cost wines. A similar approach can exist at the other end of the market as Ernest, the wine importer, suggests:

Ernest: It's very important for people in my side of the business to accept ... that you are not the arbiter of taste. Customers will drink what they like, regardless of what you think, and what you like - so don't get too hung up on it. And I think that's pretty important in the distribution game.

It is an important part of Ernest's role to assess the quality of foreign wines and then buy those he considers good. However, it is not his role to determine the consumer's preferences. At a different price level from Don, and for a substantially different clientele, he must separate his ultimate evaluation from the judgments his customers may make.

For those mediators who believe in the importance of quality to what they sell, a key issue is communicating that quality to the consumer. As has been suggested, consumers seemed especially wary of marketers and retailers who comment on the purported quality of a wine. One way around this is to subsume the quality into the story of the wine. In what follows from a paired interview, two sommeliers discuss the renowned and exclusive dried-grape wines of Valpolicella in north-east Italy:

Belinda: Amarone - it's a special wine because of the time it takes to make it. And the raisining of the grapes in the Amarone rooms. And you go there - and you're romanced by the smell of plum, prune characters in the air.

Olivia: And history.

Belinda: And history. And you go in and see where Dante lived. I mean those things make it special, it's not Jacobs Creek. These are carefully crafted, single-vineyard, hand-made gems. It's the difference between getting factory made jewellery and a hand cut diamond set in beautiful gold. What Rolls Royce is to a Toyota off the rack. Haute couture or Target fashion.

Olivia: The other thing is that those premium end wines are somebody's labour of love ... And that shows, and it's nice. It's nice drinking somebody else's work

Belinda: It ... gets people like us excited. And then we pass that excitement on to our customers.

Olivia: People love a story.

Belinda: People love a story.

Olivia and Belinda perceived the quality of Amarone to lie in the vineyards and in the care bestowed on its production. Rather than sell the customers quality, they want to sell them a story. This certainly includes the uniqueness of the production, but also its history (one of the production companies in Valpolicella is owned by descendants of Dante Alighieri), the aromas of the drying rooms and the details of the families who make the wines. What they are selling (literally and metaphorically) is something different and exclusive. They considered that it is not like any normal volume branded wine, which shows no distinctiveness, little character and is drunk by everyone. It is also worth noting that some consumers understand the story behind the wine, and may respond positively to it:

Laura (SC, medium-involvement): I went to visit Danielle at Orange, when she was doing the [grape] picking. Knowing how much goes into the actual making of the wine [helps]. Whereas I've also been to some of the big wineries in the Hunter - and it seems to be quite a mass process ... If you know a bit of the history and background to the wine you do appreciate it a lot more as well. Whether that's the label on the back that tells you the chambourcin<sup>2</sup> was a hybrid - and the guy died before he could pass it on ... Background, I think, goes towards your perception of the quality of the wine as well.

Laura helped her friend pick grapes, which gave her a sense of where the wine originates and a sense of personality in contrast to some of the volume wines she might have seen on trips to the Hunter Valley. Any information such as history, details of grape varieties and family background, helps to build a picture of the wine which can colour the perception of quality positively.

### **3.3 *Winery and vineyard***

Wine producers were invited to comment about the respective role of vineyard and winery in shaping quality wine. The impact of the vineyard can be twofold. First, it is responsible for the quality of the grapes; second, it may impart some character to the wine. This difference reflects two distinct though not

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<sup>2</sup> A red, hybrid grape variety.

contradictory attitudes to quality. The first is technical, and involves guaranteeing faultlessness, or fitness for purpose. The second entails instilling the wine with interest, distinctiveness or complexity and may relate closely to the paradigmatic dimension of reflecting origin.

With regards to the first criterion most informants tended to see guaranteeing grape quality as equally important as the way the wine is shaped by the winemaker:

Wendy (winemaker): You can't make great wine out of ordinary grapes. So the first thing is to get the grapes. The role of the winemaker is the caretaker of the fruit - and to express what's made from the vineyard. So the first step is the fruit, that comes from vineyard, and then follow through to the winery. And I rate them equally.

Wendy's view, rating vineyard and winery equally important, was probably the general winemaker's perspective.

As far as the second criterion – of creating interest in the wine - was concerned, some producers did seem to conclude that the vineyard is important for the character of the wine – at least with certain wines:

Clive (winemaker): In essence [I want to] reflect what comes out of the vineyard - which is really a big fat cliché. But put something of interest into it. I like wines with interest.

Jill (winemaker): I'm with Clive ... my focus is the vineyard and getting it right in the vineyard. And from there it's just nurturing all that effort you put in and capturing it. Just capturing the effort that you've put in the vineyard - and maximising it, optimising it, with a little bit of your own personal touch. But I reckon a lot of personal touch can be put in the vineyard.

Bill (winemaker): You still have a lot of options in terms of what sort of style you want to make with the same parcel of fruit though.

Jill: Sure, yeah. But if you don't have the fruit what are you going to work with?

Vince (viticulturist): I think there's different levels of wine making. If you're talking the super premium end ... it's more vineyard focused. Whereas, I guess, [with] commercial wine...

Clive and Jill considered that concentrating effort in the vineyard and letting the wine reflect its origin are critical to what they do. Bill was a little more guarded about this, noting that the winemaker still has many ways of styling the wine. Vince – the viticulturist – agreed that with the most expensive wines (presumably the ones

of highest quality) vineyard is paramount, but for the commercial, high-volume wines, the winemaker's influence shaping the wine is likely to be dominant.